

***'BENIGN NEGLECT' – TOWARDS AN
UNDERSTANDING OF THE CULTURAL
ENABLERS AND BARRIERS TO LEARNING
TRANSFER***

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by

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Abstract

‘Benign Neglect’ – Towards an understanding of the cultural enablers and barriers to learning transfer.

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This study explores the ways in which organisational culture affects the transfer of learning. Much of the research in this area has focussed on the transfer of learning from formal training courses taking a positivist approach to examine specific influencing factors. This study takes a wider view exploring learning transfer through the lens of organisational culture. This study also takes a more holistic view of learning, exploring the ways in which current models of transfer might apply to both formal and informal types of learning. The study focuses on the UK civil service, as a sector not yet considered by the literature.

The methodology takes a social constructionist approach and uses qualitative research methods to build a contextualised view of learning transfer, using individuals’ perceptions of their organisations. A series of one to one and group interviews were used to gather data from three samples groups. A system of thematic analysis was chosen to identify a variety of categories and themes for analysis.

The study concludes that existing models of transfer do not reflect the complex and iterative nature of learning transferred from a wider range of learning experiences. It also concludes that in the civil service a transfer-supportive culture relies on the creation of a supportive ethos that encourages transfer through sub-cultures and informal practices, rather than imposed formal systems and active line management practices. The success of these informal practices is because they reflect more closely the cultural assumptions learners. This study recognises that this approach is dependent on a positive individual disposition towards learning and a management practice of benign neglect.

By taking a holistic approach to learning and a wider perspective of organisational influences, via the lens of organisational culture, this study has added to our understanding of learning transfer beyond existing models.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Aim

Since research into learning transfer began over 70 years ago (Crafts 1935) studies have focused on an examination of those factors that influence the transfer of learning from specific, formal training courses. The models and theories put forward as a result of these studies have often reflected the behaviourist view of 'learning as acquisition'. The growth of interest in recent years in workplace and informal learning practices and processes has seen learning conceptualised differently as a social and contextual process. These new learning theories have encouraged researchers to question our existing conceptions of transfer.

The aim of this study is to extend existing theory by exploring the ways in which organisational culture affects individuals transferring their learning from a wide range of formal and informal experiences. This study will examine critically current models and theories of transfer, applying more recent insights of learning theory to explore their continued relevance. Therefore this study will focus on how organisational culture influences the process of learning transfer.

It will not seek to establish a measurement of transfer effectiveness nor to identify the levels of transfer achieved by individuals.

As well as focussing heavily on learning transfer from formal training courses a review of the literature shows that most previous studies have also taken a positivist approach; using quantitative research methods to examine specific influencing factors. This approach has provided the academic community with hard data and a range of testable models regarding those specific influencing factors. However this approach has not helped us to understand the deeper and often more complex influences that affect the transfer of learning from a wider variety of experiences. This study takes a different approach and aims to add to the existing body of research by taking a more holistic view of learning and a wider view of organisational influences. The study takes an interpretivist approach, using a qualitative methodology to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' experiences and the system of organisational influences. It uses the lens of organisational culture with which to explore some of the interconnectedness of those influences and focuses on the UK civil service as a sector not yet considered by the literature.

The context for the study

This study is set within the context of an increased appreciation that knowledge, skills and intellectual property are sources of organisational advantage. It is also set within an economic climate in which funding for training is being reduced and organisations are seeking to make more effective

and efficient use of their available knowledge, skills and intellectual property.

Writers such as Singer and Edmondson (2006) have argued that:

'Learning is critical for organisational performance in the current economic landscape'.

They and other writers such as Senge (2006) and Argyris (1999) have long stressed the importance of learning and knowledge to the ability of organisations to excel. Others have focussed on the transfer of that learning into the workplace; a process described by Haskell (2001) as:

'The very foundation of learning, thinking and problem solving' (ibid: xiii)

For more than 70 years (Crafts 1935) researchers have been exploring the processes involved in and the influences on the transfer of learning from the classroom to the workplace. As a result there is a firmly established body of literature on the subject (Huczynski and Lewis 1980; Noe and Schmidt 1986; Baldwin and Ford 1998; Thayer and Teachout 1995; Holton 1996; Cheng and Ho 2001; Clarke 2002; Mirriam and Leahy 2005; Cheng and Hampson 2008; Burke and Hutchins 2008; Chiaburu et al 2010). However despite having described learning transfer as the foundation of learning and thinking, Haskell (2001) went on to say that currently:

'We have failed to achieve transfer of learning at any significant level' (ibid: xiii).

As yet there is no real agreement on how much learning is transferred from the classroom to the workplace, although the figures suggested by the literature can be alarmingly low. Writers have suggested a figure as low as 10% (Curry, Caplan and Knuppel 1994; Curry and Caplan 1996) although others have argued that this figure is mythical; brought about by the misquoting of a rhetorical question posed by Georgenson (1982). Burke's (1997) study found that 40% of learning can be recalled immediately following training, but that this declines over time to a low of 15% within a year. A study carried out by Saks and Belcourt (2006) identified a figure of 62% of learning transferred into the workplace, with a decline over 12 months to 34%. However these figures were self-reported by the 150 participating organisations and the authors themselves admit:

'The use of self-report data from a single source also is a limitation that can cause method bias and measurement error' (ibid: 645)

Given the current economic context some of these figures and any lack of agreement might make gloomy reading for organisations seeking to demonstrate an effective return on their investment in training.

The National Employer Skills Survey (2009) highlighted that companies in the U.K. spend over £39 billion on staff training and development (both on and off the job training) annually. Translating this into the civil service, research by Government Skills (2007) identified that Departments spent between £500m and £1bn a year on training. The discrepancy in the reported figures is

because spending is not calculated in the same way by all Departments. However even taking the lower figure this is still a substantial investment. The civil service is facing severe cuts to all Departmental budgets and to be able to demonstrate more efficient use of their investment in training would be of great value. A report by Benington and Hartley (2009: 3) has argued that effective leadership in the public service could be:

'One of the most valuable ways of reducing transaction costs between organisations, and of improving efficiency, performance and productivity across the whole Public Sector.'

As the largest part of any Department's training budget is spent on leadership and management development, this is a very powerful reason for wanting to explore and improve the ways in which their organisational culture affects the transfer of learning into the workplace. This study does not intend to measure learning transfer or to join the debate about percentages of training transferred, but by identifying those cultural aspects that influence the transfer process, it aims to offer support to organisations to improve their practices.

The focus of the study

The review of literature will illustrate that writers on the topic of learning transfer (Huczynski and Lewis 1980; Noe and Schmitt 1986; Baldwin and Ford 1988; Geilen 1996; Cheng and Ho 2001; Merriam and Leahy 2005; Cheng and Hampson 2008) have generally agreed on three key areas of influence on the

process and practice; the trainee, the training event and the organisational environment. Whilst recognising that all these factors are closely linked, as cogently argued by Kirwan (2005), this study aims to build on the body of research concerned with the effects of the organisation on individuals transferring their learning. The decision to focus on the role of the organisation was informed in part by a report commissioned by the National Audit Office (February 2009). The report identified the main barriers to learning and application experienced by government Departments as the...

...‘silo structures, ineffective mechanisms to support learning, a high turnover within the workforce and a lack of time’

rather than the motivation and ability of the learners or the design and delivery of the training interventions.

The focus of the study was also informed by calls for further research in this area by writers such as Baldwin and Ford (1988); Cheng and Ho (2001); Clarke (2002); Cheng and Hampson (2008), Egan (2008) and Chiaburu et al (2010). Clarke (2002: 150) in particular concluded that because research into organisational factors has been so highly segmented it has produced conflicting results:

‘As a direct consequence of different components of the work environment being studied’.

Such discrepancies in conceptualisation have made it difficult to determine which aspects of the work environment actually influence learning transfer. Other writers too (Salas and Cannon-Bowers 2001; Kirwan 2005) have suggested that it would be more helpful to take a wider, systematic view of how organisations might create an effective, transfer-supportive environment. With the intention of trying to avoid some of those discrepancies and conceptual differences and in order to take that systematic view, this research chose to use the wider lens of organisational culture with which to examine the experiences of individuals transferring their learning. By taking this wider perspective the research aims to identify some of the interconnectedness between those influencing factors, providing a richer and more finely grained picture of how organisational culture supports the transfer of learning.

A further influence on the focus of the study was that, as Clarke (2002) and Bishop et al (2006) have pointed out, much of the existing research has been carried out in the private sector and within United States. Clarke (2002:147-148) in particular argues that in the United States:

'Very different human resource management practices, business strategies and values will shape both distinctive organisational cultures and work environments...'

What makes the focus of this study different is that it explores the transfer of learning from a variety of experiences and is carried out within the UK public sector.

The research questions

As described earlier the aim of this study is to explore how organisational culture influences learning transferred from a variety of experiences, in the UK civil service, prompting the main research question:

- ***In what ways does organisational culture affect the transfer of learning in the UK civil service?***

The study intends to add to the existing body of research and theory by taking a more holistic and wide ranging approach to learning and learning transfer. In order to answer the main research question the following subsequent questions were devised to focus the study:

- ***Are different types of learning transferred in the same way?***
- ***What are the cultural assumptions and practices associated with learning and transfer in the civil service?***
- ***Are different types of learning transfer influenced by the same cultural aspects?***

In addressing these areas through a qualitative methodology it is anticipated that a detailed picture will be painted of the ways in which individuals transfer their learning and how organisational culture influences the process.

Structure of the study

Chapter Two – A Review of the Literature

The aim of this chapter is to set the academic context for the study, explain the origin of the research questions and illustrate how this study contributes to this field of research. This is done through a critical analysis of the existing literature and research on several themes identified as relevant to the research questions. The key themes are identified as learning transfer, workplace and informal learning theory and organisational culture. The review explores existing models and theories of learning transfer, assessing their limitations and applicability to a wider range of informal, workplace learning experiences. The literature provides the study with some relevant definition of terms and a composite framework/model of a transfer-supportive organisational culture with which to compare the findings from the interview data.

Chapter Three – Methodology

In chapter three the methodological strategy used to address the research questions is outlined, explained and justified. It is argued that, given the nature of the research question and an underpinning interpretivist philosophy of social constructionism, an inductive approach, based on Glaser and Strauss' concept of grounded theory (1967), using qualitative data gathering techniques were required. The strategy informed the use of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with three groups of interviewees across five government

Departments. The three groups are introduced, the sampling strategy is explained and interview process and practice are presented and justified.

The process of data analysis is explained. The key themes identified from the data are presented to illustrate how the data were organised and structured during the analysis process. Finally the chapter reflects on the reality of the research process, including some thoughts regarding the practicalities of semi-structured interviews and the importance of self-awareness to the process.

The chapter also pays attention to the ethical issues, and it is argued that whilst no serious ethical dilemmas were encountered, the fact that the research involved senior leaders and was conducted within workplaces heightened the need to maintain respondents' anonymity and confidentiality.

Chapter Four – Findings and Discussions

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews and focus groups for discussion. It uses the themes that emerged from the research as a framework for presentation. Firstly it examines the learning experiences of the senior managers and administrators, both formal and informal, and explores the ways in which they transferred their learning. This is to identify if different types of learning are transferred in different ways, and sets the context for an exploration of the cultural influences on these processes later in the chapter. Secondly it presents the findings from the stakeholder interviews examining their perceptions of their organisation's culture and its support for learning

transfer. Thirdly the chapter returns to the interviews with the senior managers and administrators and explores their cultural assumptions, their experiences of transferring learning and their perceptions of the cultural influences.

The key findings from the study are that whilst some of the learning transferred from formal, tailored skills training courses and some informal skills development reflected the 'near' (Detterman 1993) and/or 'direct' (Nikandrou, et al 2008) styles of transfer, the majority of the transfer reported from both formal and informal learning, reflected more closely the 'far' (Detterman 1993) and/or indirect (Nikandrou, et al 2008) styles. All the transfer reported was found to be influenced by the same cultural aspects.

The chapter examines the formal and the informal systems and practices concerned with transfer across the Departments. All the interviewees describe a variety of formal systems designed to encourage and support learning transfer. However the learners report that these are most often ineffective. Instead the supportive transfer environment is found to be dependent on a culture that encourages the creation of informal sub-cultures and practices, which are in turn dependent on the individuals' disposition to learning. The chapter also explores the theme of differences and similarities between the five Departments.

Chapter Five – Conclusions

The final chapter brings together the conclusions drawn throughout the previous chapters and examines them in more detail. The chapter compares

the findings from the research with the transfer supportive culture suggested by the literature review and argues for a reconceptualisation of existing models and theories to take account of the more complex and flexible ways in which both formal and informal learning are transferred. It concludes that in the civil service informal sub-cultures and practices provide more effective support for learning transfer than formal organisational systems and structures. This transfer supportive culture comprises individually and collectively driven activities and networks, supported by visible leadership and learning. Together with a practice of 'benign neglect' this transfer supportive culture offers space and implied permission for learners to transfer their learning in their own ways. The study does however recognise that this approach is heavily dependent on the individual's own positive disposition towards learning.

Finally some implications for policy and practice are highlighted together with potential for further research.

Chapter Two

A review of the literature

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to set the study in context, to explain the rationale for the research and to illustrate how it is intended to add to the existing body knowledge on the topic. The review of literature will provide the study with some working definitions and with a composite framework/model of a transfer-supportive organisational culture, with which the findings from the research data can be compared.

Whilst this study is located in the wider body of theoretical and empirical literature concerning adult learning, it focuses on the specific topic of learning transfer. This study aims to identify the cultural aspects that support and/or hinder the transfer of learning and is concerned to extend existing theory to include consideration of the transfer of informal, workplace learning. The research takes an interpretivist approach and rather than setting out a theoretical framework for the study, it aims to build theory using empirical data. Therefore this review has been structured to explore several key themes of specific relevance to the overarching research question:

- ***In what ways does organisational culture affect the transfer of learning in the UK civil service?***

And subsequent questions –

- ***Are different types of learning transferred in the same way?***
- ***What are the cultural assumptions and practices associated with learning and transfer in the civil service?***
- ***Are different types of learning transfer influenced by the same cultural aspects?***

As such the chapter begins by identifying a working definition of the term 'learning transfer' to support the research, and continues by exploring the theme of transfer to set the context for the study. This section examines the evolution of thinking and research on the topic, and then provides a critical review of many of the influential models and theories in light of more recent studies regarding informal and workplace learning. This is done to explore the continued relevance of these models and to consider their potential limitations. The chapter then explores some of the more recent conceptualisations of workplace learning and transfer, and questions the relevance to them of conventional models.

To avoid unnecessary segmentation of the various influencing factors the study chose to use the wider lens of organisation culture through which to explore individuals' transfer experiences. Therefore the next theme for discussion is organisational culture. This section examines a variety of models and theories of organisational culture to establish an understanding of the term and a working definition. This section also provides the study with a composite framework/model of what the literature suggests a transfer-supportive culture might look like, which is later compared with the findings from the research data. The chapter concludes with a summary of the rationale for this study.

Defining learning transfer

As an aide to analysing current models and theories a working definition of learning transfer was considered appropriate. Stiefel (1974, cited in Huczynski and Lewis 1980) described the transfer of training as both the ability to apply what has been learned, and being able to use it in an organizational situation. Baldwin and Ford (1988: 64) defined transfer as the '**generalisation of material learned in training** (e.g. skills acquired, knowledge gained) *to the job context*', arguing that it also required '**maintenance**' over a period of time. Broad and Newstrom's (1992) definition supported these views, adding that positive transfer is concerned with the effective and continuing application of knowledge and skills gained through training. Though outcomes are not explicitly referred to, they are implied in the notion that transfer can only be detected through the generalisation of learning to the job context, over and for an unspecified period of time.

These definitions describe the learner taking new knowledge and skills, acquired through training, and transferring them into a work context; an approach described by Cheng and Hampson (2008: 328) as the '*conventional*' school. This study accepts Baldwin and Ford's definition as a description of transfer from formal training. However, as this research aims to move the debate from focussing only on the transfer of learning from formal training, to a wider consideration of informal and workplace learning, the appropriateness of this definition for other types of transfer will be considered later.

The evolution of learning transfer research

This next section offers an overview of the evolution of research in the area of learning transfer to set some context for the later analysis of existing theory.

This is followed by two further sections that consider some of the key influencing models and theories in more detail, with a view to considering their relevance to transfer from informal, workplace learning.

Attempts to understand and explain the process of learning transfer have a history going back to the 1930s when Crafts (1935) tested the retention of problem solving skills of a group of college students, over a period of 6 weeks, examining the role of the training design in the process. Later studies (Fleishman 1953; Hand et al 1973) began to explore the influence of individual trainee characteristics and organisational and environmental factors.

Fleishman's work included one of the first studies into the effects of supervisor behaviour on the transfer of leadership training, demonstrating its role in the

process. Hand et al's study produced one of the earliest illustrations of the effect of the trainees' perception of their organisation's climate on training transfer. Since then the debate has produced a wide variety of theoretical models and frameworks to illustrate the transfer process, including Huczynski and Lewis (1980), Baldwin and Ford (1988), Thayer and Teachout (1995), Holton (1996), Geilen (1996) and Burke and Hutchins (2008).

Traditional evaluation models were dominated for over 40 years by Kirkpatrick's four-level model of Reaction, Learning, Behaviour and Results, (1967).

Although Kirkpatrick did not mention transfer specifically, levels three and four (Behaviour and Results) of his model became synonymous with Training Transfer and Training Effectiveness (Alliger and Janak 1989). Warr et al (1970) and Hamblin (1974) later followed with their own models of evaluation using similar behavioural indicators. In the mid 1980's Noe (1986) and Noe and Schmitt (1986) expanded the debate concerning motivation to transfer and introduced the concept of environmental support. In 1989 Alliger and Janak's meta-analysis of 12 studies began to challenge some of the assumptions of Kirkpatrick's model, particularly with regard to the links between Reaction and Learning. The small size of the study reduced the authority of the study's findings; however this challenge to Kirkpatrick's four level model was taken up again later by Holton (1996) and Holton et al (1997).

In the late 1980's Baldwin and Ford (1988) carried out a meta-study of the extant research on transfer and identified a steady consistency across the literature of three broad categories of influence, 'trainee factors', 'training

design factors' and 'environmental or organisational factors'. Their critical evaluation provided the foundation for a systematic model of training transfer (*Figure 2.1*). Building on the work of Noe and Schmitt (1986), Baldwin and Ford's model suggests that the influencing characteristics of the work environment comprise '*social support*' and '*opportunity to use*'. This framework became the influence for many later models.

In the early 1990's Holton's (1996) work moved the transfer debate away from focusing on the outcomes, as suggested by Kirkpatrick's model, and towards those inputs that influence the success of training. Holton's studies examined a range of trainee and training design inputs, as well as organisational factors, particularly those factors that could be enhanced in the organisation to produce a climate supportive of transfer. Holton's HRD Evaluation Research Measurement Model (1996) became the basis for the construction of the Learning Transfer System Inventory (LTSI). The LTSI (Holton et al 2000) was developed as a diagnostic tool to identify and assess those factors that influence transfer in a practical way in the workplace, rather than as an illustration of the transfer process.

During the 1990's large amounts of research were carried out in this area, but it was still concerned with the transfer of learning from formal training courses, often focussing on one particular training event (Rouiller and Goldstein 1993). However the focus of many of the studies was now widening to include *situational variables*, such as the opportunity to practice (Ford et al 1992) and supervisor role (Gregoire et al 1998); and *job variables*, such as organisational

commitment (Tannenbaum et al 1991), along-side individual characteristics and training design. The culture and climate of the workplace as an influencing factor was an area that was becoming of keen interest to researchers. However there was little empirical research carried out and Rouiller and Goldstein (1993) and Tracey et al's (1995) work were among the few studies conducted to explore the links between individual motivation and a learning supportive environment and the importance of a shared perception of the value of training.

The early 2000's saw further developments and refinements of Holton's LTSI (Holton et al 2000; Holton and Baldwin 2003; Cheng et al 2005; Kirwan and Birchall 2006). In 2003 Enos et al's study of management training in the USA became one of the very few studies to begin to explore the transfer of informal learning. Their findings began to challenge some of the existing thinking concerning influences on transfer and this study aims to build on their work. More recently studies on transfer motivation (Egan et al 2004; Egan 2008) have produced some interesting findings suggesting that job satisfaction and motivation to transfer learning are associated with a learning organisation culture. Egan's (2008) recent study has also found that individuals are often more motivated by informal and sub-cultures than by the overall organisational culture. Again his work has informed the focus of this study.

The consistency of the influencing categories initially identified by Baldwin and Ford (1988) has since been replicated throughout more recent meta-studies, with only slight variations in descriptions; including those of Colquitt et al (2000), Cheng and Ho (2001), Merriam and Leahy (2005) and Cheng and Hampson (2008). Cheng and Hampson's (2008: 330) review adapted Colquitt

et al's (2000) list of those variables which had been tested across previous studies and illustrated what they considered to be the two major ones – motivation to transfer and transfer behaviour. However it is important to note that almost all of the development of existing theory has been predicated on studies involving learning transfer from formal training courses, and often involving only one specific course (Rouiller and Goldstein 1993; Tracey et al 1995; Clarke 2002; Subedi 2006). Baldwin and Ford's (1988: 71-84) meta-study demonstrated this narrow focus and the following table (*table 2.1*), illustrating a range of more recent studies, reflects the same focus.

Recent research concerning learning transfer

Research	Date	Where	Type of training	Sector	Type of research
Burke & Baldwin	1999	USA	Formal/structured curriculum	Private	Quantitative
Clarke	2002	UK	Formal	Public	Qualitative
Enos et al	2003	USA	Formal & informal	Private	Quantitative
Egan et al	2004	USA	Formal	Private	Quantitative
Subedi	2006	Nepal	Formal	Private/Public	Quant/Qual.
Saks and Belcourt	2006	Canada	Formal	Private	Quantitative
Nijman et al	2006	Netherlands	Formal/classroom	Private	Quantitative
Velada et al	2007	Portugal	Formal/classroom	Private	Quantitative
Liebermann and Hoffmann	2008	Germany	Formal	Private	Quantitative
Burke and Hutchins	2008	USA	Formal	Private	Quantitative
Egan	2008	USA	Formal	Private	Quantitative
Nikandrou et al	2009	Greece	Formal	Private	Quantitative
Nielsen	2009	Denmark	Formal/Apprentices	Private	Qualitative
Chiaburu et al	2010	USA	Formal	Private	Quantitative

Table 2.1

These studies also continue to focus attention on sample groups from the private sector, with very little research undertaken in the U.K. This gap in the research has prompted this study to explore the transfer of learning from a wider range of activities and to examine the topic using sample groups from the UK civil service, where arguably the organisations' cultural influences could be very different.

With further studies has come an increased number of inconsistent findings (Cheng and Hampson 2008) to the point where variables have been seen to

produce different effects in different circumstances (Bates and Holton 2004; Holton et al 2003; Nijman et al 2006). Cheng and Hampson (2008: 335) argue that these inconsistencies demonstrate that our current models *'may not be adequate for studying the transfer process'*. They suggest that the rise of the workplace learning schools with their emphasis on context may leave little room for the role of transfer. By taking a holistic view of learning, this study will explore the role of transfer when concerned with all schools of learning.

The next two sections will explore some of the models and theories of transfer in more detail and consider their continued relevance for describing the transfer process. The first section offers a reflection on some of the influential models of transfer. The second section explores some of the influencing factors identified by current theory.

Existing models of Transfer

One of the first models designed to illustrate the transfer process was as a result of research by Huczynski and Lewis (1980). Their study of participants attending two management courses concluded that the transfer process was positively affected by the individual's participation in decisions regarding the training (pre-course discussions and attending on their own initiative) and support from their line manager. Their model illustrated a range of before, during and after individual and environmental factors that were found to facilitate and inhibit transfer, all of which were heavily influenced by the behaviour of the line manager.

Baldwin and Ford's (1988) influential model (*figure 2.1*) combined existing thinking and described a similar linear process of learning transfer, influenced by the three categories of trainee, training design and work environment characteristics.

A Model of the Transfer Process

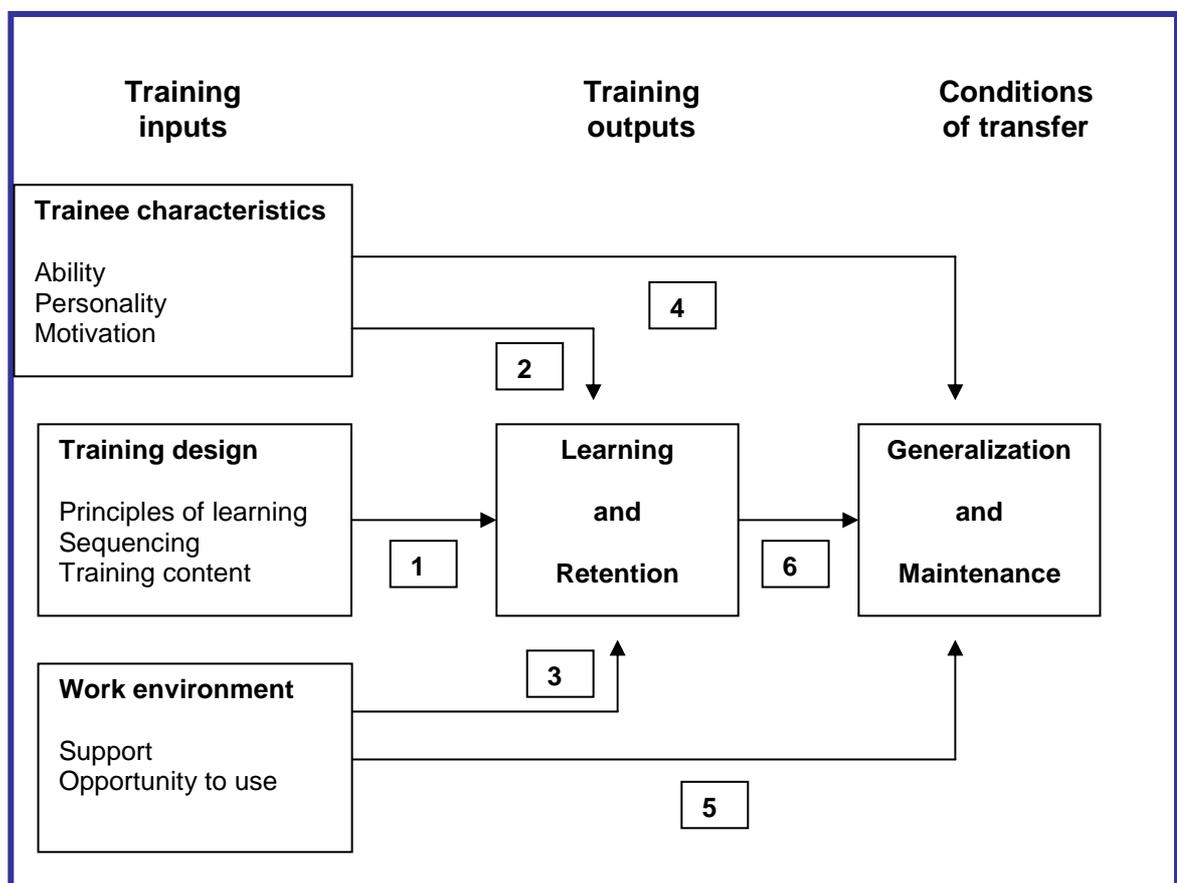


Figure 2.1 (Baldwin and Ford 1988: 65)

Baldwin and Ford's model, based on the findings from their meta-study, indicates where training-input factors and training outcomes have both direct and indirect effects on the conditions of transfer. For example the three training

inputs are shown as directly impacting the training outputs of learning and retention (linkages 1, 2, and 3) and in turn indirectly effecting Transfer (linkage 6). Trainee characteristics and the work environment (linkages 4 and 5) are also shown to directly impact conditions of transfer, regardless of learning and retention. Reflecting the findings of Huczynski and Lewis (1980), their model also illustrates the value of line management support; although Baldwin and Ford acknowledge there was a lack of understanding in the literature of the specific supervisory behaviours that led to the learners' perceptions of support (1988: 85). Their model is illustrative of the thinking that has influenced learning transfer theory for over 20 years. However the discrete and linear process described by these models will be shown later to be of less relevance when describing the transfer of more complex forms of informal, workplace learning.

In the intervening years more research has been undertaken and whilst some writers have concentrated on exploring specific influencing factors (Baumgartel et al 1984; Noe 1986; Noe and Schmitt 1986; Boud and Walker 1990; Lim and Johnson 2002); others have developed a wider systems approach, arguing that the transfer 'system' is a broader construct than simply a combination of individual factors (Rouiller and Goldstein 1993; Thayer and Teachout 1995; Tracey et al 1995; Clarke 2002; Holton 1996; Burke and Hutchins 2008). Their research has also provided the literature with further models of transfer. Boud and Walker's (1990) model described a process of transfer from experiential learning, based on individual reflection. Their model reflects Kolb's' experiential learning cycle, which argues that reflection and planning are key

parts of the adult learning process. However, although this model should, in theory, be applicable to informal workplace learning, it relies on the consciousness of the learner to actively reflect on their learning before transferring it. As will be seen later in this chapter, not all learning provides for that conscious, reflective process. The model also omits any of the contextual factors that might influence the transfer of learning.

Thayer and Teachout's (1995) training transfer model, based on the previous work of Rouiller and Goldstein's (1993), took a wider, more systematic approach. The model illustrated a system of influences that impact before the training (trainee factors), during training (transfer enhancing activities) and after the training (climate for transfer). Their climate for transfer comprised the same cues or antecedents (goal, social and task cues) and consequences (positive and/or negative feedback) as Rouiller and Goldstein's (1993) model, minus the self-control cues. Thayer and Teachout identified that a positive transfer climate, as with the positive work environment of Huczynski and Lewis (1980) and Baldwin and Ford's (1988) models, is linked strongly to the supportive behaviours of line managers and peers. In such an environment, Davenport and Prusak (1998) also argued that learning or the transmission of knowledge can become embedded in contingent and incidental social interactions in the organisation. Once again Thayer and Teachout's model illustrates the transfer process as linear steps –

Before (the influences on the learner) – learning – transfer – results

Later discussions will explore the limitations of this illustration when applied to the transfer of informal learning.

More recently Burke and Hutchins' (2008: 120) empirical research produced a model, based on existing transfer models, in which they argue that peer and colleague support emerge as the only significant positive relationship in the transfer process. Their model is one that goes beyond the classic linear approach, suggesting that:

'the transfer problem is not rooted in a specific time phase and thus its remedies should not be either, rather, support for transfer should be a iterative and pervasive process throughout the instructional design process'

Whilst their model does offer an alternative view of transfer, it still describes it from a formal training perspective; one that includes *'the instructional design process'*. The illustration of the transfer process as *'iterative and pervasive'* though is something that resonates far more with the more complex and flexible nature of informal, workplace learning, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Influencing factors

Exploring some of the influencing factors described by existing models and theories in more detail will help to illustrate their focus on transfer from formal training, and identify their potential limitations. For simplicity the study chose to

do this using the categories identified by Baldwin and Ford's (1988) model of Trainee characteristics, Training design and Work environment.

Trainee characteristics

Research has identified a wide range of trainee characteristics that purport to influence learning transfer, including the importance of the trainee's existing skills and abilities (Baldwin and Ford 1988; Holton 2009) as well as their motivation to apply their learning (Kirwan and Birchall 2006). Baldwin and Ford's (1988) and Noe's (1986) studies suggested that the more trainees understood about the goals and outcomes of their training the more motivated they were and the more committed to transferring their learning. Cheng and Ho's (1998) work also demonstrated a link between learners who enjoyed a positive learning experience and their propensity to apply their learning.

The autonomy to be able to put their learning into practice, as well as having an early opportunity do so, were identified as important trainee characteristics by Baumgartel et al. (1984) and Lim and Johnson (2002). Their studies also identified that an early opportunity to use new learning was the primary reason for transfer and the concomitant lack of opportunity as the key reason for non-transfer. Belling et al's (2003) study also concluded that trainees who could perceive an immediate relevance of their learning to their work environment were more likely to apply that learning.

Holton et al (2000) identified the value of learners' prior experiences to effective transfer and Barrick and Mount (1991) highlighted the personality of the learner as important factor. Sacks and Belcourt's (2006) study demonstrated that the involvement of the trainee in the training, rather than as a passive listener also encouraged transfer. The relationship the learner has with their organisation, or their psychological contract, has also been found to influence the level of effort they are prepared to put into both learning and transferring that learning. Porter (1985) described how the willingness to exert effort to maintain organisational membership is driven by how closely the individual identifies with the organisation's goals and values. This process has more recently been described in terms of the individual's engagement with their organisation, which includes learning and sharing that learning.

Individual agency is also fundamental to this debate. Bourdieu (1984), whilst developing biography as a method of social research, identified what he called habitus, or the internalisation of dispositions that inform an individual's actions and reactions. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) used the term habitus to explain how different dispositions enabled individuals to see and respond to different learning opportunities, differently. Their study recognised that over the course of their lives people reference multiple cultures and are subject to many social influences; all of which help to inform the subjective biographical 'baggage; that individuals carry with them. Hodkinson and Hodkinson's (2004:167) research into individuals' disposition towards learning illustrated how an individual's disposition influenced their learning in the workplace. In their study concerning

secondary school teachers they argued that the different dispositions resulted in different approaches to learning.

In order for many of these trainee factors to play an effective part in the transfer process the learner needs to be able to recognise and understand their learning and be conscious of its application. To be aware of one's own knowledge and skills, to understand the relevance of the learning goals set out by the training and to identify the opportunities to transfer, requires a level of explicit and conscious thought which limits the influence of these factors to the transfer of formal, conscious training. Motivation, personality, emotional commitment and engagement operate at a more subconscious or implicit level and could therefore be said to influence a wider range of learning transfer activities. Individual disposition is a factor that will also influence a wider range of learning and transfer experiences.

Training design

The training design factors that have been identified as supportive of transfer include an effective use of adult learning principles and teaching methods, the professional knowledge and experience of the tutors and the appropriate contextualisation of the training (Baldwin 1992; Holton et al 1997; Saks and Belcourt 2006; Velada et al 2007; Burke and Hutchins 2008). High levels of participation encouraged during the training course and the use of activities designed to encourage trainees to plan how to apply their new skills have also

been identified as important for enhancing transfer (Thayer and Teachout 1995; Saks and Belcourt 2006; Burke and Hutchins 2008).

Saks and Belcourt (2006) and Burke and Hutchins (2008) emphasised the importance of pre and post training activities in the design of training. Both studies found that learning activities before and after training significantly enhanced the event itself and were related to the positive transfer of learning. Velada et al's (2007) research also demonstrated a significant relationship between training design and transfer. They argued that the design of any training should encourage the learner's belief in their ability to transfer their learning and should provide feedback regarding their performance post the training. Santos and Stuart's (2003) study found that post training activities such as an ongoing review of materials and post training visual aides and cues in the workplace were often more influential than the actual training event in facilitating transfer.

More recent research by Liebermann and Hoffmann (2008) involving German bank employees has also concluded that making clear the relevance of any training to the workplace has a strong influence on both the motivation to transfer and on actual transfer. Baldwin and Ford (1988) and Machin and Fogarty's (2003) work demonstrated that a physical similarity between the training and the workplace settings can also have a positive influence on training transfer. Machin and Fogarty (2003) described this as the concept of identical elements.

By their very nature many of the design factors can only be said to influence the transfer of explicit and conscious formal training, where the trainee is aware of the training and its relevance to their job or workplace. The 'input/output' and 'antecedents and consequences' models describe a very linear 'before and after' learning and transfer process. This makes them well suited to describing the transfer of formal, classroom based training and possibly some of the more organised types of informal, workplace training. However these factors would not be relevant to the more informal methods of workplace learning where there is no structure, planning or even conscious recognition of the learning, to aid transfer. The concept of identical elements (Machin and Fogarty 2003) could have a relevance to the transfer of informal/workplace learning, where the learning and transfer environment are often the same place.

Work environment

The literature on the subject is full of examples that demonstrate the importance of organisational factors to the transfer of learning (Huczynski and Lewis 1980; Baumgartel et al 1984; Tracey 1992; Rouiller and Goldstein 1993; Tracey et al 1995, Holton et al 1997; Gregoire, Propp and Poertner 1998; Belling et al 2003; Kirwan and Birchall 2006; Subedi 2006; Velada et al 2007; Burke and Hutchins 2008). However those individual factors considered to be of greatest value have been consistently the support of other people, especially managers and peers, the positive consequences of transfer and organisational systems and processes. Whilst some studies have singled out specific factors

for investigation, others have looked for a combination of factors that will produce a supportive transfer environment.

Throughout the literature the overall description of the environment has varied across a range of models and theories. In some cases it is described in terms of 'climate', either training, transfer, organisational or psychological; in others it is described as the organisational environment, the work environment, the organisational culture and wider still, the transfer system. The terminology used to describe the work environment and its relevance to this study are discussed in more detail later in this chapter; for this section it is simply necessary to raise awareness of the variety of terminology.

A constant theme throughout the research (Baldwin and Ford 1988; Holton et al 1997; Cromwell and Kolb 2002; Saks and Belcourt 2006; Chiaburu and Harrison 2008; Egan 2008; Burke and Hutchins 2008; Chiaburu et al 2010) is the importance of the support of others. Traditionally operationalised as having people within the organisation who will support and influence trainees to transfer their training, various studies have identified different levels of support including management, peer and organisational. Supervisor or management support is described by the literature as providing learners with opportunities to practice use their learning, as well as offering a level of autonomy to create their own opportunities to practice new skills. Management support can also be demonstrated through positive feedback for learned behaviours, encouraging confidence and the motivation to continue to apply learning. Gregoire, Propp and Poertner (1998: 15) and Holton and Baldwin (2000) have suggested that

supervisors can influence the transfer by making clear what learning is valued and by providing opportunities and support for learners to apply their learning in the workplace.

On the other hand manager sanctions and a resistance to change are reported as inhibiting the motivation to transfer. Therefore middle managers in particular have the potential to be either highly empowering, if they demonstrate behaviours that are aligned throughout the organisation or highly disempowering, by sending conflicting signals that create confusion and lack of motivation. Chiaburu et al's recent work (2010) has suggested that trainees are more likely to consider the application of their learning if they feel motivated and interested to want to acquire new skills and knowledge in the first place. This learning goal orientation, they argue, can be encouraged through both supervisor and organisational influence. All of which echoes Eraut's (2004) argument that the role of the manager is key in establishing an environment favourable for learning through their people management skills and practices.

The leadership environment, created by the behaviour of supervisors and senior leaders, was identified as significant in affecting the transfer of learning by Fleishman as early as 1953. More recently Wain (2008) highlighted that learning transfer is more effective if driven from the top and role modelled by all leaders throughout an organisation. The importance of senior management and indeed Board level support to successful learning and transfer is demonstrated in research carried out by Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe (2006) who examined both public and private sector organisations. Their

findings reflect research carried out by the Danish Leadership Institute (Buus 2005) which highlighted the link between successful leadership development and strong Board level support. This illustrates that not only does the leadership of the organisation appear to play an important part in motivating learners to learn; it can also be influential in establishing a culture that encourages the transfer of learning.

The support of peers has also been identified as an important influence in building an environment or system conducive to the transfer of new skills (Noe 1986; Chiaburu and Harrison 2008; Burke and Baldwin 2008). Chiaburu and Harrison's (2008) work has suggested that as individuals have more opportunities for interaction and exchanges with their peers and work colleagues, the opportunities to influence should be '*nontrivial*' (ibid: 1084). Their research found that the actions of colleagues can predict attitudinal and behaviour outcomes in trainees by serving as a '*rich source of help and information*' (ibid: 1094). The extent to which colleagues are open to change and the application of new thinking is considered to be highly important in motivating individuals to take risks with new learning (Baumgartel et al 1984; Broad and Newstrom 1992; Chiaburu and Harrison 2008). All of which reflects the expansive learning environment described by Fuller and Unwin (2004), which although not specifically describing a transfer environment, does include many of the practices suggested by others as contributing to the 'transfer climate' (Tracey 1995; Burke and Baldwin 1999).

Gregoire, Propp and Poertner (1998) have highlighted that although the tone can be set by the behaviour of peers, managers and senior leaders, organisations need to have effective systems in place to support them. They suggest that for organisations to be really effective they need to be committed to the practice of learning transfer and take a level of responsibility for making it happen, rather than leaving that responsibility to motivated learners and supportive supervisors. According to Gregoire, Propp and Poertner (1998) these process and systems help to demonstrate the value placed on learning and transfer by an organisation. These systems include providing the time and the resources to support new learners applying new skills (Noe 1986). Positive, supportive activities include initial discussions with line managers to initiate goal setting, feedback mechanisms and action planning discussions as part of performance review. Creating a system of further learning or continuing professional development opportunities throughout the organisations also illustrates the importance placed on personal and professional development.

As well as formal HR and performance management systems, research has also explored the use of coaching as a method of transferring learning (Olivero, Bane and Kopelman 1997) by providing the learner with a level of formal and informal support and feedback on their developing performance. Lim and Johnson's (2002) study of Korean HR professionals also identified that that one of the most influential organisational factors was a demonstrable commitment towards training and a climate of open communication.

Research by Holton et al (1997) found that learners are often motivated by the positive organisational consequences of transferring their new learning, which might include career development, a bonus or a rise in salary. Cheng (2000) identified specifically that being noticed favourably by senior leaders as a consequence of using new skills and knowledge encouraged further transfer. This reflects Dalley and Hamilton's (2000) research which found that individuals will often pay more attention to what they see is valued and rewarded by the organisation. Evidence has also suggested a link between the perceived cost of a training course and the transfer of learning (Belling et al 2003). Seemingly if learners perceive that the training offered is of high quality and expensive, they are more likely to consider using their new learning. In theory therefore organisations that demonstrate high levels of commitment to learning and transfer can influence those behaviours in its members.

However it is important to consider that whilst formal practices may be important to the transfer process, they may not always represent the true values and assumptions of an organisation. In some cases they may represent managerial rhetoric or be an attempt to mask the real values by which the organisation operates. De Long and Fahey (2000) argue that where there are no shared assumptions regarding the value of new thinking then the transfer of learning is unlikely, despite any formal processes being in place to encourage it. Egan's work (2008: 299) identified that it was often the informal, sub-cultures that '*were highly associated with employee motivation to transfer learning*' and had a greater influence than formal systems. This concept of the potential power of informal sub-cultures and practices is a particularly interesting one for

a study of the civil service; an organisation recognised for its formal systems and practices.

Existing theories have described how these wide ranging organisational factors contribute to the creation of a supportive transfer environment and influence the transfer of learning. However, whilst the leadership, management and peer behaviours could be said to create an environment that would influence all types of learning transfer, the HR systems such as pre-course meetings, appraisal and performance management are limited in their influence to the transfer of more formal training. The reward and recognition factors, whilst aimed at encouraging the application of formal training, their existence in the organisation could contribute to a perception of support for learning and transfer of all types. As mentioned earlier, there are though discrepancies among writers concerning the efficacy and relevance of some of the specific influencing factors which will be considered in more detail later in this chapter.

Two other theories that are helpful to this debate include Detterman's (1993) concept of 'near' and 'far' transfer and Nikandrou et al's (2008) 'direct' and 'indirect transfer'. Near transfer is described as the transfer of skills and knowledge directly to the workplace, in the same way, every time, in every circumstance; a view reinforced by both Broad and Newstrom (1992: 6) and Tannenbaum and Yukl (1992: 240). Far transfer, on the other hand, takes into account that the training may be applied to a '*similar but not identical*' situation in the workplace (Noe 2002: 5) and that learners might need to be trained to

adapt their skills and knowledge to changing situations or environments. Both styles of transfer describe a process of consciously transferring known learning.

Direct transfer (Nikandrou et al 2008) reflects Detterman's near model in which training is taken from the classroom and applied directly to the workplace, with no need for adaptation. Indirect transfer however refers to either unintended learning as a result of attending training or to learning that is transferred in a way not intended by the design of the training. In some cases indirect transfer is from learning that has been acquired from the process rather than the content of the training; such as learning that story telling is a good way of communicating with others because the speaker used stories to illustrate a point. It can also be used to describe the transfer of learning acquired from someone other than the formal tutor; such as other participants or through personal reflection, networking or experience. Whilst direct transfer again illustrates a process of formal, conscious training transfer, indirect transfer suggests that the process might be more complex than a straightforward movement of knowledge and skills from one place to another. It also recognises that individuals do learn from a variety of experiences, not simply because they are being formally taught.

The limitations of existing models

A review of the literature on the topic of transfer has revealed two specific areas of limitations.

Firstly, despite much agreement, there are some discrepancies within the literature, regarding both the influence of specific factors, and the terminology used to describe the combination of organisational or workplace factors (Van der Klink et al 2001; Lim and Johnson 2002; Clarke 2002; Nijman et al 2006). One of the key discrepancies concerns the value of line management support. This has been questioned by many including Velada et al (2007) and Nijman et al (2006: 530) who have suggested that '*empirical research does not unambiguously confirm this positive relationship*'. Their research illustrated that increased supervisor support can occasionally provoke negative reactions in learners and decrease their motivation to transfer. Deelstra et al (2003) also found that imposed organisational support was linked to a lack of transfer. They argued that formal support systems might be considered as coercive and negatively affect how learners felt about their freedom to choose how to implement new learning.

Clarke (2002: 150) has suggested that many of the discrepancies arise because organisational factors are often conceptualised differently or because different components are being studied. Machin and Fogarty (2004: 224) also described how many researchers tend to '*assess specific facets of the organisation's climate for transfer of training*', rather than considering the organisation as a whole system. This leads to what they described as a '*deficit*' in the research.

There is also within the literature a variety of terminology used to describe the organisational environment or workplace. 'Climate' is used by many (Thayer

and Teachout 1995; Tracey et al 1995; Bates and Khasawneh 2005) to describe both individual and shared group perceptions of a narrow range of organisational characteristics. Baldwin and Ford (1988) separate the organisational factors into 'supervisor support' and 'work environment', whilst Holton et al (2001) combine all the influencing factors into what they term the transfer system. This includes organisational factors, training design as well as the individuals' personal characteristics.

Salas and Cannon-Bowers (2001) and Nijman et al (2006) have suggested that rather than view these factors in isolation, it would be more helpful to take a wider, systematic view of how they combine to create a transfer supportive culture. This discrepancy of terminology and the segmentation and conceptualisation of factors have prompted this study to explore learning transfer through as wide an organisational lens as possible, in order to take that systematic view.

Secondly, as highlighted earlier, almost all the research has been concerned with identifying those factors and conditions that influence the transfer of learning from formal training. The resulting models and theories have, therefore, reflected a behaviourist and acquisition view of learning and transfer. As a result many of these existing models and theories are limited in their application to the transfer of formal classroom training. However even when the transfer of formal training could be described in terms of these theories, such as 'near' and 'direct', one should also important remember that learners also adapt their skills and knowledge as they become more familiar with them

and their work, learning and applying extended knowledge or improved skills as they go along. Tsoukas' (2001) research described not only the process of interpretation of taught information, when applied to the workplace but also the concept of 'heuristic' knowledge. In a study of call centre operators Tsoukas (2001:988) described the process by which learners did not just apply the procedures they had been taught directly to the workplace (near and direct) but also extemporised their knowledge based on personal experience and amended set procedures as they became more familiar with them. This process of continual learning and application is not yet accommodated by existing models of transfer. Hager and Hodkinson's (2009) assertion that the transfer of learning is more than simply applying what is learned from a formal course has encouraged this research to take a more holistic view of learning and explore the influences on transfer from a variety of learning experiences.

Having considered some of the limitations of existing models and theories, the next section explores the more recent conceptualisations of learning and examines the relevance of conventional transfer models to them.

Informal and workplace learning

The growth of interest in recent years in informal learning practices has seen learning conceptualised as a social and contextual process (Lave and Wenger 199; Enos et al 2003) and as an ongoing, often unconscious process (Billet 2001; Eraut 2004). These learning processes have encouraged researchers to question existing models of learning transfer suggesting that there can be no

one steady-state model. (Nijman et al 2006). Enos et al (2003) in particular have identified that informal learning is often a more social process and is often transferred more frequently. Alongside which a debate has grown seeking to challenge the term 'transfer' because, as Lave (1996: 151) described,

'Learning transfer is an extraordinarily narrow and barren account of how knowledgeable persons make their way among multiple interrelated settings'.

Hager and Hodkinson (2009) also objected to the use of the transfer metaphor, suggesting that it makes assumptions about learning, such as the traditional 'empty vessel' theory (Piaget 1926), that have been contradicted by more recent understanding of the complexities of how learning occurs.

Evolution of informal/workplace learning theory

The development of informal and workplace learning theories has challenged previously held beliefs that effective learning only occurs within a formal, structured classroom environment. Beckett (2004: 244) described this formal process as being concerned with developing and improving the mind and one that was *'expressed verbally and written down in books...'* During the late 20th century anthropologists and social scientists, including Lave (1988), became concerned that conventional learning theories that inextricably linked teaching and learning were unable to explain how adults learned outside the structures of formal education. They considered that to contextualise learning as a formal process that could only happen through teaching was at odds with the ways in

which humans learn as babies and children, by watching others, trying things out, getting things wrong and trying again. This type of learning, as Billett (2001: 21) explains, occurs all the time, with both adults and children, with no thought for time and place and often independent of being taught:

'We learn constantly though engaging in conscious goal-directed everyday activities – indeed, as we think and act, we learn.'

Fundamental to this type of learning is being consciously engaged with the process and being able to *'construct knowledge from these situations'* (Billett (2001: 21). This reflects Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning, that adults learn from concrete experiences, but only when they are encouraged to reflect on that experience in order to draw conclusions and plan to act differently as a result. This school of thought suggests that simply having an experience does not automatically lead to learning. Vygotsky (1978: 85) argued that the difference between the potential for development and actual learning is determined by *'adult guidance or in collaboration with more able peers'* in what he described as *'zone of proximal development'*. Eraut (2004) also highlighted four areas of workplace activity that support learning, all of which include an element of encouragement, input or feedback from others, often peers or experts.

Whilst many of these new models of adult learning were moving away from the idea that effective learning has to happen in a structured format, preferably within a classroom under the supervision of a tutor, they still assumed a level of

input or '*guidance*' and '*collaboration*' involving those with greater expertise. They also assumed that learning needed to be, if not intentional, then at least conscious. This still limited the thinking about learning to those opportunities for instruction, collaboration and conscious reflection.

Workplace learning

More recent research (Foley 1995; Billett 2004; Eraut 2004) has begun to recognise and value other more informal methods of learning. These new models and theories suggest that learning can include a wider variety of activities and experiences. These activities range from direct and structured input from those with more knowledge or experience, to the individual acquisition of tacit knowledge gained through everyday activities such as conversations, experimentation and observation. Foley (1995: xiv) identified four areas of activity through which adults learn, three of which involved the support of others; however one in particular he described as:

'The incidental learning that occurs as the result of everyday learning....related to a person's professional or workplace activities'

Both Billett (2004) and Eraut (2004) have suggested that workplace learning should be viewed as a continuum, rather than an 'either/or', 'formal/informal', debate. Eraut's (2004: 250) continuum describes three forms of learning 'deliberative', 'reactive' and 'implicit'. 'Deliberative' learning is reflective of

Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning and pays attention to proactively constructing knowledge from situations and planning to apply that knowledge to a different situation (Billet 2001). 'Reactive' learning is less structured and planned, but still requires brief and deliberate opportunities for reflection, in what Schutz (1967) refers to as the continuous flow of experience. Implicit learning is described as the unstructured and often the unknowing acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Deliberative learning describes the conscious learning from organised, formal training courses, and informal learning interventions, where '*guidance*' and '*collaboration*' would be used to aid both learning and transfer. 'Reactive learning includes informal learning opportunities among communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991: 98), action learning sets and deliberate personal reflection. Support for learning and application is provided by skilled practitioners or experienced peers, the 'old hands' (ibid: 98), whose role is to develop the 'novices' as active members of a community. The implicit, situational learning is acquired from engaging in everyday activities where 'trial and error' is a key learning method. Here the learning is characterised by a lack of any input from a teacher (Eraut 2004) or practitioner. Opportunities for learning present themselves daily in the form of conversations with colleagues, practicing skills, solving problems and interacting with others (Gerber 1998). It is at the implicit end of the continuum, where the learning is most contextualised.

Whilst current models focus on illustrating the transfer of learning from deliberative learning and from some of the reactive learning activities, a fundamental challenge for the transfer of implicit learning is that it is often '*non-intentional*' (European Commission 2001: 32). It may involve only the learner, who may not even recognise that learning has taken place and in which case the learning can remain invisible to both the learner and the organisation. Individuals' responses to learning situations are heavily dependent on their past experiences and how they understand learning and work. For many people work and learning are '*two quite separate activities*' (Eraut 2004: 249), and therefore they may find it hard to recognise their learning from everyday work activities. If they see the two as separate and non-integrated worlds then they may have difficulty in making the link between what they have learned and how to apply their new learning (Pillay et al 1998).

This review of learning theory so far has provided the study with a continuum (*figure 2.2*) which illustrates the various types of workplace learning. This typology will be used in the research interviews to clarify meaning, should the interviewees require it, emphasising that this is intended as a flexible illustration of styles, not a fixed set of definitions.

A typology of learning styles

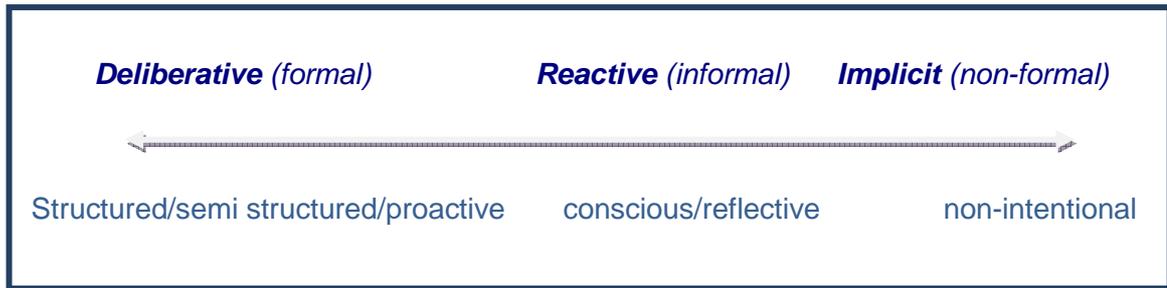


Figure 2.2

Transferring workplace learning

The definition of the transfer process as identified earlier involves individuals learning new skills and knowledge, generalising/contextualizing them and transferring them to the workplace. This is often illustrated as a staged process with a distinction between the learning and the transfer events. However if learning is a continual process when, as Enos et al asked (2003: 381), '*does learning stop and transfer start?*' Existing models describe a linear process of transfer in which learning is consciously taken from explicit training and transferred into the workplace. Consequently their relevance for the more complex types of informal, implicit and unconscious workplace learning is questionable. There have been only limited studies concerned with the transfer of informal learning and this research aims to move this particular debate forward. One study by Yelon, Reznich, and Sleight (1997) has argued that informal learning is transferred through a much more fluid and dynamic process in which learning; application and new learning are all a part of the same

continuous system. All of which reflects the continual, ongoing process of workplace learning described by Eraut (2004).

It is helpful at this point to examine two metaphors of learning which illustrate different ways in which learning is considered. Described by Sfard (1998) as 'acquisition' and 'participation', these two schools of thought illustrate a fundamental difference in how learning is perceived, rather than different styles of learning. Learning as acquisition describes the perception that learning can be packaged into useful and usable parcels to be given to the participants who can then take it away and transfer it into the workplace. This school of thought is illustrative of the traditional pedagogical theory that learners are empty vessels into which learning can be simply poured (Piaget 1926). This thinking is often reflected in the formal process of workplace learning where structured input with predefined objectives, delivered by experienced practitioners or tutors produces demonstrable outcomes. On the other hand, the metaphor of learning as participation considers learning to be something that happens all the time and that the workplace is just another venue for learning. This school of thought reflects both Lave and Wenger's (1991) social and situated learning theory, and Billett's (2001: 21) concept that '*learning and working are interdependent*'. This also challenges Kolb's theory that effective learning must involve reflection and planning.

Both schools of thought make assumptions about the transfer of learning. The acquisition model assumes that once the learning has been acquired the learner will be able to take their learning into the workplace and move it around

wherever and whenever it is needed. The participation model assumes that as the learning is heavily contextualised the initial application may be a straightforward process, but that the learning might not be applied so easily in a different context, without encouragement or support.

Enos et al (2003: 381) found that for the managers in their study informal learning was both a social and a continuous process and that the transfer of their learning was *'embedded in the informal learning processes*. They also discovered that contrary to previous studies (Rouiller and Goldstein 1993; Tracey et al 199), the transfer of informal learning was influenced less by the transfer climate and more so by the learners' (managers) meta-cognitive abilities. Enos et al suggested that as these managers were very experienced and demonstrated high levels of expertise they were able to rely on their own:

'Internal mechanisms to develop and transfer skills, even under minimally supportive conditions' (ibid 2003: 382)

As a large number of the learners interviewed for this research are also anticipated to comprise very experienced managers, this study will be interested to see if these findings are replicated in any way.

The review so far has demonstrated that whilst many of the current models and theories illustrate the process and describe the influencing factors of the transfer of formal, classroom training, they are less relevant to describing the application of more complex workplace learning. Many of the theories and

models require both an initial '*instructional design process*' (Burke and Hutchins 2008: 120) and a conscious understanding by the learner of what has been learned, neither of which fit with the informal, non-intentional, implicit types of learning. Existing thinking also requires learning to be visible to the learner and others in order to benefit from the support of organisational systems. Existing models are highly reflective of the acquisition metaphor that understands training transfer as a linear process, rather than the more complex and continuous process in which learning and application are one. Yorks et al (1998) have demonstrated that the greater the commonality between learning and doing, the greater the likelihood of transfer; suggesting that learning informally in the work situation has the potential to produce greater levels of transfer.

New theories have extended how we think about learning, and these now need to be applied to extend how we think about the application of that learning. If, as Tracy et al (1995) maintain, learning is something that occurs all the time, what is it that encourages the application of that learning? If that learning can also be invisible, unconscious or unintentional how can organisations create an environment that will encourage individuals to identify their learning and make use of it? This study aims to identify some of the interconnectedness between the organisational and cultural factors and explore their influence on all types of learning transfer.

The next section examines the concept of organisational culture, considering a range of models and theories to establish a working definition and identify what,

from the literature's perspective, a model of transfer supportive culture would look like.

The concept of culture

From a social research perspective the study of culture has had an interesting history, from its beginnings in anthropology to its present day usage in organisational and management studies. This review does not intend to delve into the deep literature of anthropology, except to illustrate briefly the evolution of the study of culture and how it has been conceptualised in organisations.

In its early days the study of culture involved the investigation by anthropologists of the '*signs, symbols, tools and beliefs*' (Friedman 1994: 75) of small, isolated societies to examine how other people lived their lives. It was concerned with identifying a national character, or what Friedman described as '*that which is distinctive about others*' (1994: 67). One of the most influential studies in the area of culture and its consequences was the work of Hofstede (1980; 1986). His initial research claimed to identify a set of characteristics that differentiated national cultures; his later research suggested that those cultural differentials could lead to variations in learning practices. His meta-study of IBM employee survey results from over 70 countries, gathered between 1967 and 1973, produced a model of four dimensions by which he differentiated cultures. The four dimensions concern Power Distance (PDI), Individualism (IDV), Masculinity (MAS) and Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI). A fifth dimension of Long-Term Orientation (LTO), or Confucianism, was added following further

research in China with Michael Harris-Bond (1991). It is important to note however that Hofstede's (1980; 1986) initial model was based on the assumption of a culture-specific theory which assumes that societies possess distinct and stable cultures. This assumption, however, ignores the intervening century of technological and industrial development and the impact of increased mobility across continents.

Anthropologists argued that culture was taught and learned, rather than inherited and that this process of teaching and learning most often occurred through the medium storytelling. The tradition of telling stories to share knowledge, to socialise and to reaffirm culture and beliefs is worldwide, with storytellers often holding a place of importance in a community (Neuhauser 1993; Finlay and Hogan 1995; Parkin, 1998; Gabriel 2000). Finlay and Hogan (1995: 3) describe how in Ireland '*story tellers were second in importance only to the king or queen*'. Stories were told to new members of a community from the earliest opportunity by those with authority, to teach the norms and behaviours of that community.

Despite the widespread interest in the study of culture there is as yet no clear, universally agreed definition. A variety of have been distilled over time, from the ethnographic view described by Tylor (1913: 1):

'The complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society';

LeVine's (1984:67) concept of '*a shared organization of ideas ... prevalent in a community*' and moving towards McKinsey and Company's more simplistic philosophy of '*the way we do things around here*', (Bower 1966).

There is also much debate, expanded upon later in this chapter, concerning how the component parts of a culture are described and operationalised. Most writers agree however that culture comprises a shared ontological perspective, or world view, resulting in an agreed set of underpinning assumptions that are reflected in an accepted set of systems, practices and artefacts. These two elements are often perceived to be mutually reinforcing (Bishop 2006: 24) and according to Drennan (1992) are also self-perpetuating, as new members are inducted into a community through stories.

Organisational culture

This next section considers the ways in which the wider concept of culture has been taken up by social researchers and applied to organisations. It examines a variety of theories which support the development of a composite model of a supportive transfer culture.

By the 1980's writers and social researchers (Peters and Waterman 1982; Brown 1998; Schein 2004) had begun to take an interest in the concept of culture as it might apply to organisations, linking organisational performance directly or indirectly to the culture of the organisation. Writers believed that

many of the theories and concepts derived from anthropological studies could be applied to the communities and societies found in organisations.

The major difference between the types of societies being studied was that anthropologists studied the complexity of a society as a whole, into which people were born and from where, until recently at least, they were unlikely to move away. On the other hand social researchers study organisational behaviour, working with groups who, to a large extent, choose to join their 'society' and who, in principle, might move freely from one to another. Social and organisational researchers work with cultures that are just as complex as those studied by anthropologists, but which are likely to be more flexible and fluid in nature. In both cases though, the study of culture still involves examining the '*signs, symbols, tools and beliefs*' (Friedman 1994: 75) of a variety of societies to understand what is '*distinctive*' about them.

Definitions of organisational culture reflect heavily their anthropological antecedents in which the underpinning '*shared basic assumptions*', are taught to new members (Schein 2004: 17). Social researcher still study the '*differential*' between groups (Friedman 1994:72), or what Hofstede (2001: 9) described as that which '*distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another*'. A clear and concise combining of all of the preceding thinking is, in the opinion of the researcher, Alasuutari's (1995: 26) definition of culture as '*each group's or community's way of life and outlook on life*'. This definition was chosen specifically as it neatly encompasses both the systems and practices (*way of life*) as well as the underpinning assumptions (*outlook on*

life) of an organisation. This definition will be used with the interviewees, to explain what was meant by organisational culture and its composition, should the information be required.

As with earlier anthropologists, writers on organisational culture have also identified that storytelling is an important part of developing and perpetuating an organisation's culture (Johnson and Scholes 1993; Moulding 1995; Bellingham 2001). They describe how the stories told to newcomers help to acclimatise them to the accepted norms of the organisation. Drennan (1992) has also suggested that organisational cultures are self-generating systems, using the induction of new comers as an illustration. He described how, in an attempt to fit into the new organisational 'community'; newcomers would adopt the cultural norms and demonstrate the accepted behaviours and practices as quickly as possible, thereby perpetuating those norms.

The concept of core and sub-cultures is a further example of how anthropological thinking has been applied to organisational culture. Whilst LeVine (1984; 68) described culture as a '*shared organisation of ideas*' he made it clear that holding these shared ideas did not mean that people within a community could not also hold independent thoughts or differ in behaviour. Freidman's view (1994:75) was that although national and societal cultures have always contained elements of other cultures, these days they do not always assimilate them to become what Rosaldo (1988: 87) described as '*self contained and homogeneous*'. Freidman suggested that instead, any number of sub-cultures can and do exist simultaneously within a wider whole.

De Long and Fahey (2000) argue that this is reflected in organisational cultural life and that it would be a mistake to assume an organisation has only one culture. They suggest that it is likely there will be a dominant organisational culture within which departments, business units, teams and sub-groups will create their own informal cultural norms. Their research demonstrated that sub-cultures will often determine '*what knowledge is and which knowledge is worth managing*', (De Long and Fahey 2000: 113) and that this can often be at variance to other sub-cultures and/or to the wider organisational culture. So when examining the influence of culture on learning transfer it was important for this research to be aware of the many versions of culture or the myriad of sub-cultures that people may be referencing.

An illustration of this flexibility of people to be members of more than one cultural community was highlighted by Gerhart and Fang's study (2005: 983). Their research into the links between national culture and Human Resource (HR) practices suggested that organisational differences account for more variance in cultural values than differences in country or nation. This finding was also reflected in a study carried out by Judge Business School, in collaboration with Cornell, Insead, Erasmus and Tilburg universities (Stiles 2007: 36 –41). Covering the HR and learning and development practices of 30 multi-national companies, the study demonstrated that although there were significant variations in national culture, organisational culture had a greater influence on HR practices. Their research highlighted that where it was important to have a global approach, national culture was often subsumed to organisational culture. The idea that organisational culture can have a greater

influence than national culture in the case of HR practices does not mean that national culture no longer applies, but it does mean that people can and do flex their behaviour to adapt to different settings and practices. All of which supports the existence of multiple and divergent cultures and subcultures within an organisational setting.

The components of culture

In the same way that anthropologists described the component parts of a culture as shared assumptions reflected in visible practices and artefacts, writers on organisational culture also talk in similar terms. These are often described as 'levels' or 'layers', with each one having the potential to inform the next. How each of these levels is named varies from writer to writer however they all reflect the anthropological view that the assumptions and values of the 'community' act as a filter through which acceptable behaviours and visible signs are admitted.

Hofstede (1984) described organisational culture a two layered model; the deep underpinning '*values*' informing the shallow and visible '*practices*'. The values are shared by the group, who in turn defines what acceptable and unacceptable '*practices*' look like. Similar language is used by other writers. Brown (1998) and Schein (2004: 31) describe the deep underlying '*mental maps*' that inform behaviours and actions as '*assumptions*' and Schein suggests five specific types. These are assumptions about humanity's relationship to its environment; the nature of reality and truth; human nature;

human activity and relationships. These assumptions, according to Schein, generate specific beliefs about how people operate, which are in turn reflected in the organisation or group's visible practices. De Long and Fahey (2000) use the term '*beliefs*' rather than values and like Schein, they refer to an intermediate level, which they call '*norms*'. Kopelman et al (1990: 284) described their two layered model as comprising '*shared meaning and manifestations*'; the outward manifestations reflecting the underpinning shared meaning.

Despite the variation in descriptors, the differences between the models are semantic rather illustrative of a fundamental difference of thinking. As Bishop et al (2006: 5) suggested, most models of culture can be described by a core of '*unquestioned and assumed values*' which inform the behaviours and '*artefacts*' with an optional mid-layer of '*explicit beliefs*'. The important point is that the underpinning assumptions are most likely to be invisible to those outside the community and in some cases to those inside; whilst the practices, behaviours and artefacts provide the visible layer.

When exploring the explicit, demonstrable practices and artefacts the themes of stories, myths and legends as well as symbols, rituals and structures thread their way through all the writings (Hofstede 1984; Johnson and Scholes 1992; Schein 2004). The Cultural Web (Johnson and Scholes 1993) identifies six interrelated elements, formal and informal, that make up the paradigm or model of the work environment. These six elements are Stories, Rituals and Routines, Symbols, Organisational Structure, Control Systems and Power Structures.

This model is based on a traditionalist view of culture, seeing it through objective items. An interpretivist model views culture through the socially constructed and shared meanings of its members. What is important to note however is Brown's (1998: 235) point that there are no simple models of a 'good' organisational culture, simply descriptions of what 'is'.

Two other schools of thought regarding organisational culture are the postmodern view which suggests that culture does not really exist at all and the Marxist 'culture as ideology' view. Postmodern writers have suggested that what is being described by is not a collective 'culture' but simply an environment of unstable and ephemeral ways of thinking and acting (Meyerson and Martin), that are entirely subjective and unmanageable. The Marxist view describes culture as a tool used by organisations to manipulate the beliefs and activities of the workforce, suggesting that colonising employees (Bishop 2005: 31) into the accepted cultural norms reduces the need for direct management or supervision.

As with many things, especially in the learning and development field, rather than trying to box organisations into a number of distinct cultural shapes it is probably more helpful to consider the variety of views on a continuum. The Marxist ideology and Hofstede's positivist view of culture as a variable that can be isolated and measured or manipulated would be at one end and the post-modernist view that culture does not exist at the other end. In between are the interpretivist and social constructionist views of culture as '*complex and fragmentary*' (Bishop et al 2006), mutually and socially created and only to be

understood and influenced by those within it. Many writers on the subject would agree that whilst organisational culture is indeed complex and socially constructed, it can, to some extent, be understood and, if not managed, at least influenced by those within and by HR and management practices.

This study argues that given the history and durability of the civil service, it has a more stable culture than perhaps other organisations, and that it does possess observable ways of working that are visible to and understood by those working within it. The study views organisational culture and its sub-cultures as socially created, understood and influenced by its members. It is not though persuaded by the Marxist argument that culture is a tool for the colonisation and coercion of the workforce. This would require the negation of any individual agency, something that this study, in agreement with Smith (2000), would argue strongly against.

Organisational culture and learning transfer

This chapter will now draw together the two key themes of this review, learning transfer and organisational culture, to consider what existing research tells us about the relationship between the two topics and to create a composite framework/model of a transfer-supportive organisational culture.

Rouiller and Goldstein's (1993: 379) study of trainee restaurant managers was perhaps the first empirical research focussing on what they described as the '*transfer of training climate*'. As was highlighted earlier in this chapter there is

still some debate in the literature about the definition of 'climate' and its relationship to organisational culture, but what is understood is that they are related and that one influences the other (Bates and Khasawneh 2005). Conceptualised as an individual's perception of the organisational context or characteristics by Reichers & Schneider (1990), James et al (1990) suggested that climate can be identified as both the psychological climate and the organisational climate. Others have argued that climate can also represent shared meanings of an organisation's characteristics, among a group of individuals (Tracey et al 1995). In either case 'climate' is not the workplace, environment or culture, but the ways in which people perceive them. 'Transfer climate' has been defined as individual or group perceptions of those systems and processes within the organisation that promote or prevent learning transfer activities (Tracey et al 1995; Holton and Baldwin 2000).

For the purposes of their research Rouiller and Goldstein used 'climate' to describe perceptions of the work environment at the unit level, in their case the restaurant level. They described a positive transfer climate in terms of eight dimensions: goal cues, social cues, task and structural cues, self-control cues, positive feedback, negative feedback, punishment and no feedback. These, they suggested, provide the trainee with reminders about their training on their return to work. Their study concluded that individuals' perceptions of the transfer climate were strongly linked to their transfer behaviour and the more positive their perception of the transfer climate, the more likely that learning would be transferred. They also identified that organisations can comprise different transfer climates, rather than a single one, which resonates with

Holton et al's (2003) findings that transfer systems often differ throughout organisations.

Further studies have begun to consider the wider influence of organisational culture (Tracey 1992; Tracey et al 1995; Lim and Johnson 2002; Egan et al 2004; Bates and Khasawneh 2005; Subedi 2006; Burke and Hutchins 2008) and sub-cultures (Egan 2008) on learning transfer and it is upon this body of research that this study aims to build. Tracey et al (1995) were amongst the first to explore the potential influence of a continuous-learning culture on the transfer process and to attempt to define clearly what they meant by the term. Their definition included an environment:

'...in which organizational members share perceptions and expectations that learning is an important part of everyday work life' (ibid: 241)

Their work also emphasised that knowledge and skills acquisition are supported by *'working together in a highly interactive work context'* (ibid: 241). The continuous-learning culture would also provide formal systems to support personal development and to encourage innovation and competition, both inside and outside the organisation. Tracey et al considered that all of these elements formed part of the wider assumptions and beliefs of an organisation and were not just limited to the training climate. In their view they would be considered a part of the overall organisational culture.

Tracey et al's study indicated that the motivation to perform new skills could be heavily influenced by the importance that the learner perceives is placed on

those new skills by the organisation. Their research also suggested that it is people's comfort and willingness to use new skills that explains utilisation, rather than simply the opportunity to use their learning. They argued that if the collective atmosphere is one of support and encouragement for change then new learning will more willingly applied.

Curry, Caplan and Knuppel's (1994: 9) work has also illustrated that an organisation's '*goals, roles, rules and interpersonal expectations*' can offer a true understanding of the value placed on learning and transfer. They argued that clarification of these elements provides the foundation for effective learning transfer. In their view organisational assumptions inform the design and development of the relevant processes and systems, which in turn influence the learning and application of that learning. De Long and Fahey's (2000: 120) work supported this contention that cultural assumptions shape the social rules and practices within organisations, which in turn influence the learning and knowledge sharing practices within the workplace.

Further support for this thinking came from Bates and Khasawneh (2005:107), who carried out one of the first studies to identify a positive link between a culture of organisational learning, and innovation. To do this they examined both the culture and the psychological climate of the organisation and concluded that:

'... innovation requires not only an organisational culture that allows learning and the generation of creative ideas to take place, but also a climate that fosters an individual's ability to share and apply that learning'.

Research by Egan et al (2004) also demonstrated that an organisational culture framed by learning organisation principles was a strong influence on individuals' motivation to transfer. However Egan's (2008) later work has also identified that it is more often the informal, sub-cultures that have most impact on individuals' motivation to transfer learning, rather than the overarching organisational culture. More recently a study by Subedi's (2006) on the cultural influences on learning transfer in Nepal has suggested that:

'Organizational culture and beliefs held by managers, supervisors and employees about training and development are likely to influence the process as well as the outcome of employee training, in Nepal' (Subedi 2006:96)

These previous findings that have illustrated the potentially positive influence of organisational culture on learning transfer are now echoed in a recent study by Burke and Hutchins (2008: 115). They too found that organisational culture can support the transfer of learning through the demonstration of a commitment to training transfer and by communicating clear expectations to learners and managers throughout the learning process.

The existing literature concerning the influence of organisational culture on learning transfer is growing; however, as with other influencing factors, much of

the research is concerned with the '*conventional*' school (Cheng and Hampson 2008) of transfer. There is agreement that cultural assumptions shape the practices and behaviours within organisations and that these practices and behaviours can create an environment conducive to experimentation and risk taking necessary to support learning transfer. This study will explore the cultural influence of five civil service Departments through the experiences of the interviewees, to see how their culture impacts learning transfer.

A composite model/framework

This next section illustrates a composite model/framework (*figure 2.3*) of those aspects that the literature has suggested would create an organisational culture supportive of learning transfer. The study acknowledges that whilst for heuristic clarity it would be useful to describe organisational culture as three discrete layers (assumptions, beliefs and practices); in reality it is challenging to draw a clear distinction between beliefs and assumptions. Therefore for simplicity this composite model will comprise an inner layer of the underpinning assumptions and beliefs and an outer layer of the practices and artefacts.

Assumptions and beliefs:

Although an organisation's underpinning assumptions are considered to be invisible and understood only by those within the organisation, drawing on the literature there is a shared understanding that an organisational culture supportive of learning transfer would assume that continuous learning,

innovation and creativity are essential for everyone's role and that sharing new thinking and skills is important (Tracey 1992; Tracey et al 1995; Davenport and Prusak 1998; Bates and Khasawneh 2005; Egan 2008).

The supportive practices and artefacts have been drawn from existing theory of learning transfer and are a mix of both formal and informal.

Practices and artefacts:

- Formal organisational systems and practices to support individuals to apply their learning, such as pre-course meetings, review meetings following training, feedback, coaching and personal development planning, (*Tracy et al 1995; Noe 1996; Olivero, Bane and Kopelman 1997; Gregoire, Propp and Poertner 1998; De Long and Fahey 2000*)
- Training that is offered to all and includes opportunities for practice and planning to apply new learning and skills (*Tracey et al 1995; Holton et al 1997; Burke and Hutchins 2008*)
- Supportive peers willing to demonstrate their own learning and encourage new thinking through work activities and social interaction (*Baumgartel et al 1984; Noe 1986; Broad and Newstrom 1992; Enos et al 2003; Egan et al 2004; Chiaburu and Harrison 2008; Egan 2008; Burke and Hutchins 2008*)

- Reward and recognition systems that encourage creativity, innovation and demonstration of new learning (*Tracey et al 1995; Thayer and Teachout 1995; Holton et al 1997; Cheng 2000; Lim and Johnson 2002*)

- Senior leaders who pay attention to learners and learning (*Cheng 2000; Buss 2005; Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe 2006; Burke and Hutchins 2008; Wain 2008; Chiaburu et al 2010*)

- Actively supportive line managers who prepare learners for training and provide opportunities for them to apply new skills (*Fleishman 1953; Baldwin and Ford 1988, Tracey et al 1995; Thayer and Teachout 1995; Holton et al 1997; Cromwell and Kolb 2002; Eraut 2004; Chiaburu et al 2010*)

There is a level of dispute concerning this last influencing factor; however there is enough positive research for this study to include it in the composite model.

A composite model/framework of a transfer supportive culture

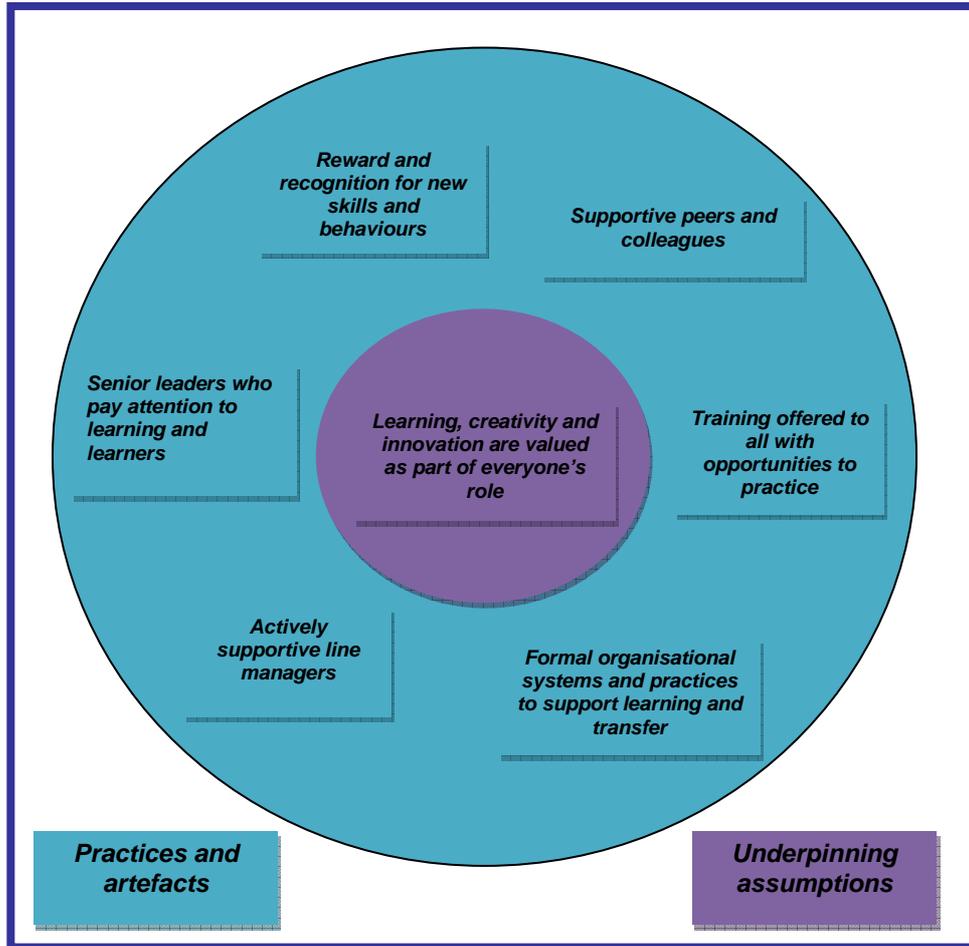


Figure 2.3

As with all the models described so far, this composite framework is based on the studies of learning transfer from formal training. This study will compare the influences identified by the literature with the findings from its research interviews, to explore if the same cultural aspects influence transfer from a wider variety of learning experiences.

Conclusions

This final section draws together conclusions from the review of the literature highlighting the gaps that have been identified and how they informed the rationale for the research and the research question.

The transfer of learning has a history dating back over 70 years which has established a range of models and theories illustrating a wide variety of contextual influencing factors, commonly categorised as the trainee, the training and the work environment. Huczynski and Lewis (1980) and Baldwin and Ford's (1988) models of transfer have been adapted over time and more recently research has begun to consider the wider influences of climate (Thayer and Teachout 1995; Tracey et al 1995; Burke and Hutchins 2008) and culture (Tracey et al 2005; Bates and Khasawneh 2005; Egan 2008; Chiaburu et al 2010). However there are still calls for further research in this area, in particular the influence of wider organisational factors, (Cheng and Ho 2000; Clarke 2002; Enos et al 2003; Burke and Hutchins 2008; Cheng and Hampson 2008) and trainee behaviour and motivation (Cheng and Hampson 2008).

The literature has demonstrated a variety of terms to describe the organisational or work environment and the different organisational factors. Clarke (2002: 150) highlighted that research into organisational factors has been highly segmented and has argued for a more holistic approach to understand the relationships between the factors. Salas and Cannon-Bowers (2001) and Nijman et al's (2006) have also encouraged researchers to take a

wider, systematic view of the various factors effecting transfer. There is still some inconsistency regarding the term 'climate'; however it is clearly a concept related to organisational culture and some suggest that they are possibly more easily understood if explored together (Schneider and Rentsch 1988). All of which has informed this study's decision to examine the influences on transfer through the wider lens of organisational culture. Rather than simply examining the individual factors already identified, this research asks the broader question:

'In what ways does organisational culture affect the transfer of learning in the UK civil service?'

The review has identified that despite all the existing research, the focus has been almost entirely on the transfer of learning and skills from formal, classroom training. Exploration of more recent thinking about adult learning has illustrated that workplace learning and its application is more complex than previous models have allowed for. In many cases the learning is informal, often unconscious, invisible and unintended. This suggests that existing transfer models are limited in their application and that those current models and theories need to be reconceptualised to become more relevant to a wider array of learning experiences in the workplace. Cheng and Hampson (2008: 335) suggest that workplace learning is so context dependent that there may be no room for transfer; however this idea simply applies the conventional transfer approach to workplace learning.

This study wants to take a new approach to the application of all types of learning and supports the view proposed by Hager and Hodkinson (2009) that a more holistic view of learning and transfer is required. To answer the overarching question, it was thought relevant and necessary to ask the subsequent questions:

- ***Are different types of learning transferred in the same way?***
- ***Are different types of learning transfer influenced by the same cultural facets?***

Studies by Clarke (2002) and Bishop et al (2006) have also identified that for the most part, current research has been concerned with the private sector and much of it carried out in the USA, where both have suggested that very different cultural assumptions and practices may apply. A review of leadership development carried out by Benington (2004) identified almost no research focusing on the central public sector of the UK (2004: 28) and its particular challenges with learning and transfer. Benington's study stressed that one of the key challenges for this sector was the transfer of individual learning '*into organisational and cultural change back in the workplace*' (2004: 28). Therefore this research takes up the challenge and specifically directs its attention to the civil service in the UK. To do so it was also thought necessary to ask:

- ***What are the cultural assumptions and practices associated with learning and transfer in the civil service?***

Examination of more recent learning theory provided a typology of workplace learning styles, to be used during interviews for clarification, if required. The review of the literature provided clarification of some of the terms to be used in support of the empirical research, in particular a working definition of learning transfer and of organisational culture.

The review also clarified that organisational culture comprises a number of underpinning assumptions which inform a range of visible practices and artefacts. It highlighted that organisations are unlikely to possess one coherent culture, but often comprise an overarching culture and a number of sub-cultures, which can possess their own informal practices. Bringing together the two topics of transfer and organisational culture finally informed the development of a composite model of the assumptions and practices of a transfer-supportive organisational culture. This in turn offers a useful framework for comparison with the empirical research findings.

This study is interested to understand the impact of organisational culture on the transfer of all types of learning. By taking an interpretative approach, using individuals' understandings of their organisation's culture, it aims to provide a detailed and contextualised view of learning transfer. There is a collective understanding in the literature that the transfer of learning can be influenced by *'the most favourable combination of input factors'* (Holton et al 2007). This research seeks to identify what might be *'the most favourable combination'* of cultural aspects required to support learning transfer in the civil service.

The next chapter examines the methodological strategy for by this study, justifying the interpretivist approach and the qualitative data gathering techniques used.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter sets out the research philosophy and theoretical stance that underpins the study. It explains the strategies used to address the research question, justifying the qualitative approach taken. The chapter discusses the selection of the sample groups, the research methods employed and the processes involved in analysing the data. Finally the chapter highlights the ethical issues involved in this piece of social research and reflects critically on the overall research process.

Scope and focus

Initially this study had proposed to focus on the experiences of a group of senior managers from four Government Departments transferring their learning from a three day, formal leadership training course. However as the review of literature demonstrated, much of the existing research has been focussed on the transfer of learning from formal, external training events, often those designed to develop managers (Huczynski and Lewis 1980; Baumgartel,

Reynolds and Pathan 1984; Tracey, Tannenbaum and Kavanaugh 1995 and Lim and Johnson 2002). More recent interest in informal, workplace learning has caused researchers to reconceptualise learning and to question this limited approach to the transfer of learning. As a result the decision was taken to widen the scope and focus of the study in three ways.

Firstly the scope of the study was widened to include exploration of transfer from informal and workplace learning experiences as well as from formal training. This was done to consider whether or not different types of learning were transferred in the same way and if they were influenced by similar cultural factors.

Secondly the study chose to include interviews with a selection of senior leaders and HR and L&D managers from the same four Government Departments:

'To incorporate stakeholder perspectives and to include some of the complexity of whole situations' (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe 2002:30)

Thirdly, to provide an occupational balance, the scope of the study also included interviews with a group of Administrators from a fifth Department to compare their transfer experiences. The selection strategy for these groups is considered later on; for now the chapter moves on to examine the philosophy and strategic approach underpinning the research.

Research philosophy

This chapter uses *'The research process model'*, described by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2003: 83), to illustrate the development of its methodology. The model shows the stages of development as layers of an onion, beginning with the outer layer which raises the question of the underpinning research philosophy. The research philosophy of any study is dependent on the epistemological view of the researcher; how one considers knowledge and how that knowledge can be gathered and studied. Central to which is whether or not one believes that the research of people and societies can be approached in the same way as natural sciences. The natural sciences created a traditional acceptance that a body of knowledge with a claim to scientific status gave credibility to that knowledge (Potter 2000:24). For social researchers in search of this credibility and authority an obvious starting point was to emulate the positivist approach. The research methods associated with this approach were designed to ensure valid, reliable and repeatable data (Gilbert 2001), from which *'detached observations'* could be made (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2003: 83).

Criticism of positivism as a suitable approach to the study of people and societies led to the development of new schools of thought such as interpretivism and social constructionism. The epistemological view of these schools was that detached objectivity in the research of people and societies is neither possible nor desirable. The purpose of interpretivist research is to develop an empathetic understanding of human behaviour (Bryman 2004:13) rather than simply describing it, and rejects the possibility of universal

explanations. The research philosophy underpinning this study is '*within the interpretivist tradition*' (Weston et al 2001). It considers reality as socially constructed and seeks to develop that empathetic understanding of the interviewees and their experiences, not to test a hypothesis. The following table (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Low 2002:30) demonstrates further the appropriateness of the philosophy to this study.

Contrasting implications of Positivism and Social Constructionism

	Positivism	Social Constructionism
The Observer	Must be independent	Is part of what is being observed
Human interests	Should be irrelevant	Are the main drivers of science
Explanations	Must demonstrate causality	Aim to increase general understanding of the situation
Research progresses through	Hypotheses and deductions	Gathering rich data from which ideas are induced
Concepts	Need to be operationalized so that they can be measured	Should incorporate stakeholder perspectives
Unit of analysis	Should be reduced to simplest terms	May include the complexity of 'whole' situations
Generalization through	Statistical probability	Theoretical abstraction
Sampling requires	Large numbers selected randomly	Small numbers of cases chosen for specific reasons

Table 3.1 (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe 2002:30)

Being a member of the civil service and the programme director for the formal training course included as part of the research, the researcher was already beyond the point at which true independence could be claimed. The focus of

the research was '*human interests*,' being concerned with personal experiences and perceptions of the interviewees. The research did not focus directly on being able to '*demonstrate causality*' but it aimed to '*increase general understanding of the situation*'. Although in exploring the impact of culture on transfer it was hoped that the study would draw some conclusions about how organisational culture helps or hinders learning transfer. The aim was to gather '*rich data, from which ideas are induced*', rather than to test a specific hypothesis. The researcher was also aware that although the approach was considered suitable for investigating this specific area of interest, it may restrict the generalisation of its findings and conclusions to learning transfer in the civil service. However it was anticipated that the findings would provide useful insights for further investigation into learning transfer in other organisations. Why this approach is of particular value to the study of learning transfer is explained further.

Much of the research that has been carried out to date in the field of learning transfer has taken a positivist approach, using quantitative survey methods to produce a series of testable views on organisations and the factors influencing learning transfer. Whilst this approach has provided the academic community with a series of models and hard data, a quantitative approach does not provide the rich data required to understand the subjective and contextual situation of individual action and the deeper cultural issues. A positivist approach uses deductive reasoning to prove a theory and produce generalisations. This study was underpinned by the philosophical belief that:

'Rich insights into this complex world are lost if such complexity is reduced entirely to a series of law-like generalisations' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2003: 84).

It aimed to build a fine grained picture and contextualised view of learning transfer using individuals' understandings of organisational culture.

Research approach and strategy

The next layer concerns the research approach. The design of a research study is based on the extent to which the researcher is clear about the theory at the outset. Much of the current literature explains the theory factor in terms of inductive and deductive approaches (Gilbert 2001; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2003; Bryman 2004). However Bryman (2004: 11) suggests that it is more helpful to think of them *'as tendencies, rather than hard and fast distinctions'*. This study took an inductive approach, there being no pre-formed hypothesis to be tested. The next layer is the research strategy and this was based on Glaser and Strauss' *'grounded theory'* (1967). The strategy was to analyse interview data, identify themes from which to generate *'insightful findings'* (Bryman 2004: 10) and to build theory. The literature review has already suggested a model/framework of themes from previous studies (figure 2.1) against which the themes from this study's data were later compared. However the model from the literature was not used as a framework for the analysis of the data.

Data collection methods

The final layer of the model is the data collection methods and for this study the methods chosen were –

- **Senior managers** – an initial telephone interview to confirm motivation to transfer within two weeks of them attending a common leadership training course; followed by a semi-structured, one to one interview six months later
- **Senior leaders, HR and L&D managers** - a mix of semi-structured, one to one interviews and focus groups
- **Administrators** – semi-structured, one to one interviews

The rationale for the choice of methods used is outlined in this section; the practical application of the methods is discussed later.

A useful guide to the choice of methods is Sayer's (1992: 243) distinction between '*intensive*' and '*extensive*' research questions and Silverman's (2005: 14) view that

'Ultimately, everything depends on the research problem you are seeking to analyse'. 'Intensive' research asks the 'how' and 'in what way' questions, prompting the use of qualitative methods. The 'what' questions of 'extensive' research are more suited to forms of quantitative methods. As this study was seeking to explore individuals' experiences and perceptions and it would argue that the questions underpinning the research were at the 'intensive' end of the scale. As such the study required a qualitative approach to data gathering.

Decisions regarding the data collection methods were also influenced by Kemp and Dwyer's (2001: 82) view that when studying organisational culture '*The richest source of data was the interviews*'. The underpinning philosophy of this study is that both experiences and the understandings that people attach to those experiences are socially constructed. That is, they are given meaning by individuals and groups, either internally or through shared dialogue (Hermanowicz 2002; Mason 2002). This research was interested in the experiences of individuals transferring their learning and their understandings of the cultural aspects that helped and/or hindered. Therefore it was considered desirable to encourage as much input and participation by the interviewees as possible. As these experiences and understandings were dependent on peoples' abilities to remember and interpret, as well as their willingness to disclose, the study required data gathering methods that would encourage that disclosure. Encouraging disclosure requires a dialogue with the respondents rather than the monologues created by formally structured interview schedules or questionnaires.

Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (2002:7) suggest that if one is interested in organisations as socially constructed activities, then one will be concerned with '*conversations*' as a means of data gathering. Burgess (1984: 102) describes the qualitative interview process as '*conversations with a purpose*' and Loftland and Loftland (1994) suggest that it is this likeness to something as natural and sociable as a conversation that makes interviewing such a powerful tool for social researchers. Qualitative interviews are the conversational means by

which the researcher can enter and begin to understand the social world of those being researched (Hermanowicz 2002; Goodwin and Horowicz 2002). Therefore qualitative interviews, both one to one and small group, were chosen as the primary, conversational method of gaining an understanding of the interviewees' experiences. Greater consideration of the detail and practices of these interviews takes place later in this chapter.

Sampling strategy and composition of the groups

The sampling strategy applied to this study was a version of theoretical sampling, described by Mason (2002: 124) and based on Glaser and Strauss' work (1967). Theoretical sampling encourages the generation of theory and insights from data gathered and as such it was chosen to support the inductive approach taken by the study. The sample groups were selected as '*meaningful and relevant*' (Mason 2002: 125) to the research question and the argument being developed, and to enabling the study to make comparisons between groups and Departments.

As the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of individuals '*people as individuals*' was the obvious first choice of a data source (Mason 2002: 52). However on further reflection the study took the opportunity to include '*people as groups*' in the form of two HR and L&D focus groups, to encourage another perspective on organisational culture and transfer. As Mason (2002: 24) explains, thinking qualitatively means understanding that there cannot be a '*single blueprint for a piece of research*' and that...

'...qualitative research is characteristically exploratory, fluid and flexible, data driven and context specific'.

In this case several of the interviewees had offered to meet together in groups, therefore presenting the opportunity to run two '*meaningful and relevant*' (Mason 2002: 24) focus groups.

The approach to choosing the sample groups was a pragmatic one. Wider groups of interviewees who met pre-specified criteria were identified (Domegan and Fleming 2003) from which individuals then self selected. The senior managers self-selected from a larger group whose specified criteria were that they were all newly appointed members of the senior civil service and had all attended the same cross-Departmental, leadership induction course. The senior leaders, HR and L&D managers were approached directly and individually as senior staff from within the same Departments as the senior managers. The Administrators self-selected in response to an email request sent to all Administrators in their Department. The specified criterion for this group was that they were not in a senior leadership role. Further details of the sample composition and selection processes are detailed below, followed by a table (table 3.2) for illustrative purposes.

Senior managers

The study took this sample from a wider group of newly appointed senior managers, all of whom had recently attended the same leadership induction

course. The rationale for the choice of training course as the source was two-fold. Firstly this leadership induction course was mandated for all new entrants to the senior civil service (SCS) and therefore could provide a wide pool of participants from which to draw. Secondly, in theory at least, there would be opportunities for the participants to transfer their learning. From their meta study of learning transfer Baldwin and Ford (1988) suggested that to provide the best chance of learning transfer the 'trainee factors' needed to include skills, motivation and a locus of control that enables the learners to apply their learning easily and quickly; all of which is supported by Holton's (2009) Learning Transfer Inventory. These senior managers had been recruited for having a high level of knowledge and expertise, as well as the motivation to learn. Demonstrating the ability to continually learn is a key competence of the senior civil service and is assessed as part of any recruitment process. Therefore the sample was drawn from a group of people who had, in theory, demonstrated their skills and motivation to succeed. Plus their roles were such that, again in theory, they had the individual capacity, the influence and authority to make the changes necessary for them to apply their learning (Baldwin and Ford 1988). Also unlike specific technical skills training where the participants may not have an immediate opportunity to transfer learning, leadership is a set of behaviours these participants were expected to demonstrate every day.

The first stage in acquiring the volunteers was to apply to Departments to ask if they would be happy for their senior managers to participate in the research. Four Departments of differing sizes, structures and business functions had

been chosen to encourage the potential for cultural variation. Department A had recently been restructured, bringing together one large, established organisation with a recently created, much smaller one; Department B is one of the smaller and newer Departments; Department C is among the largest and one of the oldest and most hierarchical Government Departments; Department D is a large established organisation that operated through a variety of Agencies.

All four Departments agreed that their senior managers could be approached to volunteer in the research. A specific run of the leadership course was chosen to ensure there would be enough participants from each Department from which to gather sufficient volunteers; whilst accommodating those who did not want to participate. The research study was described during the course and it was explained that there would be a formal follow up email seeking volunteers from the four Departments. All 32 potential participants were contacted by individual email, to ensure anonymity, immediately following the programme. The email (Annex A) asked if individuals would be interested to support the research and outlined the interview process. The request resulted in a comfortingly high response rate of 22 individuals across the Departments, with several apologies for not having the time and only three non-responses. The issues concerning self-selection are highlighted later in this section. The spread across the Departments was very uneven with the majority of respondents coming from Department A (12) and the smallest number from Department D (2). Other Departments provided 3 (Department B) and 5

(Department C), however, although unbalanced, these numbers reflected the proportion of participants on the programme.

Interestingly there was an equal split of men and women, despite there being a slightly higher number of men in the potential pool. The majority of those interviewed were career civil servants; however eight of them had recently joined from the private sector. All of them had been promoted to senior management roles within the previous year. Questions were not asked about age or ethnic background, only about their learning and transfer experiences.

Senior leaders, HR and L&D Managers

At the same time the HR and L&D managers from the four Departments were also approached and invited to be interviewed for their perspectives on learning transfer and the organisations' culture. They were approached individually and asked to participate in a one to one, semi-structured interview, to which they all agreed. They were made aware that senior managers from their Departments were being interviewed but not who, as anonymity had been promised to all interviewees. Two HR managers also recommended contacting their senior leaders and inviting them to participate in the interviews. Three senior leaders subsequently agreed to do so, which brought the total number of the senior leaders, HR, L&D managers to 12. Two of the senior leaders and two of the HR managers agreed to personal interviews; which followed a similar process to those of the senior managers. Others offered the opportunity to meet as a group, one from Department B (four people) and one from Department C (four people) which offered the opportunity to carry out two focus groups.

Administrators

To offer some occupational balance to the senior manager perspective, six members of administrative staff from a fifth Department (E) were also interviewed to explore their experiences of learning transfer and the influence of their organisation's culture. The fifth Department was the researcher's home Department and was chosen for expediency and ease of access. However to ensure against any conflict of interests none of those interviewed worked directly with or to the researcher. This was another self-selecting process and interviewees were gathered from a wider group of administrators throughout the Department. The six responded to an email request, similar to the one sent to the senior managers, asking for volunteers to participate in the study. The volunteers were all interviewed on a one to one basis, using a similar interview process to that used with the senior managers. All of them were women, four of whom had joined recently from the private sector; two had been in the civil service since leaving school or college.

A breakdown of the individuals, their roles and the interview process in which they participated is outlined in the table below. The interview and focus group processes are described later in this chapter.

A breakdown of interviewee groups and methods

Dept. ID	Senior managers 1:1 interview	Senior Leaders/HR/L&D managers 1:1 interview	Senior Leaders/HR/L&D managers Focus Groups	Administrators 1:1 interview	Totals
A	12	2			14
B	3	1	4		8
C	5		4		9
D	2	1			3
E				6	6
Totals	22	4	8	6	40

Table 3.2

To ensure anonymity of the interviewees individuals are referred to by their Department identification letter (A to E) and a personal number, A1 to A14; B1 to B8; C1 to C9; D1 to D3 and E1 to E6. The numbering system included all senior managers, senior leaders and HR and L&D managers and administrators, whether they were engaged in one to one interviews or focus groups, to ensure that no one person can be identified.

This provided a total research sample of 40 which was comparative with recent qualitative research into this topic (Clarke 2002; Nikandrou et al 2009) and one that could be managed effectively in the timescale. The purpose of the research was to explore the individuals' personal experiences of transferring their learning and their individual perceptions of the influence of organisational

culture on the process. It was not measure what they had learned or what they had transferred, therefore a self reporting process was considered necessary rather than an issue.

It was made clear to all participants throughout the process that the research was for academic purposes and that both their anonymity and confidentiality would be assured. All of the participants in this study were volunteers and as such the study recognised the issues concerned with a sample that has a strong bias towards self-selection. Where those who have strong views are keen to take part there can be a risk that the lack of varied representation might skew the data. However the researcher used as many opportunities as possible to encourage as wide a range of participants to take part, in order to level the playing field but without trying to influence the outcomes of the research.

These included talking to people at the leadership course about the research, resending the initial email request for volunteers and extending the deadline for responding. It was very important to recognise the fine line between encouragement and coercion and to acknowledge that ultimately each person had the choice to participate or not. There was to be no feedback loop to any of the Departments about who had volunteered or not.

The data collection processes

Senior managers

The data collection for the senior managers was designed as a two stage process. This comprised an individual telephone interview with each volunteer two weeks after the course; followed by a face to face semi-structured interview six months later. Telephone interviews are the least desirable, having the disadvantage of relying on verbal input only; losing the important signals provided by body language and eye contact that are a key part of personal interviews (Gilbert 2001; Hermanowrzc 2002). However as the researcher had already met the interviewees on the leadership course a personal rapport had already been established and the lack of visual input did not appear to be an issue. The telephone interviews were used to establish that there was a motivation to transfer learning from the training course, in order to be able to discuss those experiences at a later stage. At this point the interviewees were also asked if they would be prepared to discuss any other experiences of learning and transfer as part of the extended scope of the study, and all of them agreed to this. The interviews were also used to continue to build relationships, which would be important for the success of the second interview. As such they took a conversational approach rather than running through a schedule of questions. .

The individual, one to one interviews six months later were designed to explore the interviewees' experiences when transferring their learning at work. The six month gap was to provide time and opportunity for the individuals to feel able to

transfer their learning. These interviews were also used to explore other learning transfer experiences including informal workplace learning. The face to face approach was chosen to enable the development of sociable '*conversations with a purpose*' (Burgess 1984: 102). However, although every attempt was made to ensure that the second interview was face to face, in four cases these had to be managed by telephone. This was due to the relocation of the senior managers overseas. Telephone interviews rarely provide the intimate conversation which Hermanowrzc (2002) held to be important to qualitative interviews. However, possibly because the relationship had already developed during the course and the initial telephone conversation, there appeared to be little difference in the openness of the responses between those who were interviewed by telephone and those face to face.

Senior leaders, HR and L&D Managers

The data collection from the senior leaders, HR and L&D managers was by means of four individual, one to one, semi-structured interviews and two focus groups, of four people each. The one to one interviews followed a similar format to those of the second senior manager interviews. The two focus groups were organised by the interviewees themselves and both groups were held at their Department's premises. Although this method of data gathering lost the intimacy of the one to one interviews, the two groups were sufficiently relaxed and open with each other and the researcher that it was felt that far more was gained than lost by the change of method. The groups were not, as Fielding and Thomas (2001:129) warned '*unwieldy*', in fact they worked surprisingly well. Recording the conversations was no more challenging than

the one to one interviews, but as the sessions ran on slightly longer (just over the hour) than the individual interviews, transcription took longer.

Administrators

The data collection from the Administrators was by individual, one to one, semi-structured interviews, following a similar process to the senior managers.

These interviews and the focus groups were held at the same time as the second interviews for the senior managers.

The interview process

Having researched the factors that constitute effective interviews (Bell 1993; Judd, Smith and Kidder 1991; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe 2002; Mason 2002) the three constant factors were the design and planning of the interview; the skills of the interviewer and the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. Writers agree that an effective mix of these three factors will encourage the two-way dialogue that is so important for the success of qualitative data gathering. These features were incorporated into the design and practice of all the interviews, to ensure the interviewees had the opportunity to contribute freely about their experiences. All the interviews were planned to be as unstructured as possible, although an initial questioning schedule was devised by the researcher and sent in advance, as a basis for developing the conversations. The questions were used only to encourage the conversation and to remind the researcher to cover the key areas. It was important that the interviewees were able to contribute their personal

experiences without feeling they were being led by the researcher who also needed to be aware that sometimes interviewees' contributions can be '*framed for the benefit of the researcher*' (Gabriel 2000:137).

The initial questions (Annex B1) were piloted, as suggested by Bell (1993) with two unconnected participants from another programme to ensure they would engender the appropriate conversations. As a result one or two questions were amended slightly to ensure clarity of purpose and a supplementary Annex C was devised to illustrate some of the concepts. The schedule was later adapted for the senior leaders, HR and L&D managers (Annex B2) and the Administrators (Annex B3). The same questions were used for the one to one interviews as for the focus groups. All interviewees were sent a copy of the appropriate questions in advance of the meeting. The intention was to gather data without unduly influencing the responses and in which case Annex C was only used where clarification was requested.

All one to one interviews and focus groups took place at a time and venue to suit the interviewee/s, as recommended by the literature. Where a suitable venue for an individual interview was not possible then arrangements were made for a telephone interview. The individual interviews and the telephone interviews took between 45 minutes and an hour each to complete. The focus groups both took slightly longer as more people were involved and all wanted to contribute. Time was taken to explain the process of the interview and to engage the interviewees in conversation. The fact that a relationship had already begun during the course and the initial telephone conversation

appeared to make the settling in process more straightforward. An electronic recorder was used to record all the one to one interviews and the focus groups, which allowed the interviewer to focus on the conversation rather than the accuracy of spelling or memory. All those interviewed expressed that they were happy to be recorded and although they were all sent copies of the transcripts for comment, none of them took up the offer. For both the initial telephone interviews and the four follow-on telephone interviews it was necessary to rely on personal note taking alone, as telephone recording is illegal.

Data analysis

Theoretical approach and process

The study had intended to take a purely inductive approach; aiming to generate insights and theory from the interview and focus group data. However as Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill's (2003: 390) point out, although one may start out with an inductive or deductive approach, *'in practice your research may combine elements of both'*. In this case as the analysis phase was a three step process. The first step was to examine the data to identify examples of learning and transfer from a range of experiences, to see if there were similarities or differences in the transfer process. The second step was to examine the data to identify those cultural aspects that supported and/or hindered the process and to explore whether or not different types of transfer were influenced by similar aspects. This was done by identifying categories and themes from the data, using an open coding system. The third step was to

compare the findings from the data with those suggested by the literature, to help to build a more detailed typology of culture and learning transfer.

As Fielding (2001:228) points out, at some stage in the research process one will be *'faced with a sorting task'* and the sorting task for this study was one of thematic analysis (Saunders et al 1997; Gabriel 2000). To begin with all of the one to one interviews and the focus group recordings were transcribed in full and the transcripts were saved as individual Microsoft Word documents. These were backed up onto a government secure network for safety and security. The transcripts were also printed in hard copy to facilitate reading and initial analysis. The first telephone interviews with the senior managers had been recorded in writing at the time and were dealt with separately as was a different reason for the collection of this data. These interviews were to ensure that the interviewees believe they had learned something that they intended to put into practice at work and these responses are illustrated first in the next Chapter.

The thematic analysis involved a process of categorising the data and then codifying it to identify key themes. Thought was given initially to the use of electronic analysis methods such as NVivo; however it was decided that the sample size was sufficient to be dealt with manually. The inductive stage of the coding began with reading the transcripts to generate units of meaning or broad categories; firstly categories concerning experiences of different types of learning and learning transfer and secondly categories concerning perceptions of how the organisational culture supported or hindered the transfer process. This was done using the actual words or 'in vivo' codes used by the

interviewees, as recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998). What was interesting was that the process of identifying those categories actually began whilst typing up the recordings and notes. The process of transcription helped remind what interviewees had said and to encourage connections with what others had contributed. These categories were further revised and refined through the feedback loop of reading and rereading.

The next task was to codify or '*organize*' the data (Charmaz 1983: 186) into these categories and the researcher was heartened by Bryman's (2004: 409) '*There is no one correct approach to coding your data*'. Codifying in this case involved searching the transcripts for text that fitted the identified categories, to facilitate the search for high level themes and patterns running through the data. This was done using word-search on the electronic version of the documents and more regularly, through constant rereading. Copies of the transcripts were then cut up and placed in envelopes representing each of the categories. The next stage was similar to completing a jigsaw, as categories were linked together to produce the themes or patterns, which are identified below. The whole process of data collection, analysis and the development of the relationships and themes was highly interactive, demonstrating that in some ways coding is synonymous with analysis, or that indeed '*coding is analysis*' (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Key Themes

- *Differences/similarities in learning types and transfer*
- *Assumptions concerning training and transfer*
- *The role of the line manager/formal systems*
- *The support of peers/informal practices*
- *Benign neglect and the role of the individual*
- *Visibility of leaders and learning*
- *Departmental differences/similarities*

The themes were then compared to those identified from the literature and a full analysis and discussion of the findings takes place in the next two chapters.

Ethical considerations

The ethical issues relating to this research fell into three key areas – the Departments, the interviewees and the researcher. The main considerations for the Departments were confidentiality and security, including the issue of being researched by a civil servant. It was essential to demonstrate that all the data gathered would be treated in strictest confidence and held securely, and that all responses would be anonymised. Being bound by the civil service code and subject to the same levels of scrutiny as the interviewees did help the researcher to demonstrate credentials. Coming from a separate Department also enabled some distance to be established between the researcher and the majority of the interviewees. There was no feedback loop from the research to any line manager.

In any social research there will always be a concern regarding power relationships. Notwithstanding the seniority of many of the interviewees, the balance of power will often be in the interviewer's favour; despite what researchers may think (Sawyer 1991). To encourage an environment in which respondents were able to open up to share their experiences the power needed to be more equally balanced. Although the researcher had the title of programme director on the formal leadership programme, the issue of power was not the normal teacher-pupil relationship. The responsibility for delivering this programme was shared with a Permanent Secretary, who carried far more power than a programme director can ever aspire to and the researcher's role was one of facilitator. The researcher made every effort to maintain a collaborative, facilitator role during the interviews. It was made very clear throughout the process that it was not compulsory for individuals to participate.

The initial telephone conversation with the senior managers gave a further opportunity to reinforce the message that interviewees had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to reconfirm their informed consent.

Collaboration with the interviewees such as that described by Fields (2000), encouraged a level of engagement with the research process. Fields describes how participants who negotiated timings and venues for the interviews as well as a level of control of the questions to be asked and answered became more engaged with the process. These methods were fully employed during the research, to the extent that the HR and L&D managers organised their own focus groups specifically for this research.

The ethical concerns for the researcher concerned the role of an insider and therefore possessing insider knowledge. The literature on ethics and research has demonstrated that there is no simple answer to this issue. Knowledge of the organisational context gives the researcher a common language and common understanding with those being researched and might prevent what Agar (1986) calls 'breakdowns'. When an outside researcher comes across a piece of common knowledge within an organisation that they do not understand one of two things may occur, by resolving the breakdown the researcher may produce new insights; however it may also hamper the investigations. This sharing of commonality might also mean that the researcher is too close to the issues to gain real insights. The researcher was a civil servant but did not work for the initial four Departments included in the research. However the administrators were garnered from the researcher's own Department, as a matter of expediency. None of the administrators interviewed worked directly with the researcher, so it was anticipated there would be no issue of direct power

Issues and Reflections

Fielding, (2001: 250) describes qualitative analysis as '*dependent on the approach of the individual researcher*'. This study would suggest that the key issues of all qualitative research are dependent on the approach of the researcher, as well as the reactions and feelings of the interviewees. For this study, as with all social research, it was important to gain the trust and support of the participants to ensure that the interviews were successful in exploring

their experiences. What was also essential was a high level of self-awareness on the part of the researcher to understand personal reactions to what emerged from the conversations (Bell 1993: 95).

Qualitative social researchers, such as Marshall (1981) and Gilbert (2001) suggest that the part played by the researcher is an important one, not just in gathering the data, but also in providing the foil for the respondent to be able to construct their experiences and meanings and in the interpretation of that data. It was important to shape the questions in a way that elicited the data required, but also ask them in a way that encouraged the interviewees to express their thoughts at an emotional level, in order to understand their experiences. Experiences are situational and to gather data about them requires questions that draw out specific and personal rather than hypothetical instances (Mason 2002). Once again the danger can often be that the researcher becomes too involved in the process and overly influences the outcome of the interview. An understanding of personal bias and a level of self-control was necessary to prevent the researcher leading the respondents too far in any responses (Gavron 1966: 159). It is important for the effectiveness of any semi/unstructured interviews that the researcher is aware of what they pay attention to; what they ignore; what they see and hear and what they miss, equally so for this study.

The ethical issues raised by this study were typical of those facing any type of participant research within a closed setting (Bell 1969). However taking Easterby-Smith et al's (2002: 54) advice about the importance of being open

and transparent the researcher's position was fully explained to the interviewees, including how the sample groups were recruited and how the data was recorded and used. All participants were civil servants and as such could not be offered inducements. They were all offered anonymity as part of the research process and it was a key responsibility to reassure participants as much as possible. As a member of the British Psychological Society the researcher was also bound by their code of conduct and ethics, as well as the Civil Service Code.

On the topic of questions, Bell (1993) advised researchers not to be afraid to probe and ask the difficult question as this can be the real value of qualitative interviews; however it was essential to be mindful of the sensitivity of the process. It was important during the interviews to remember that interviewees were talking about their personal experiences and to be careful not to influence the examples they gave (Saunders et al 1997). Which brings with it further concerns about impartiality and what Giddens (1993) refers to as the double hermeneutic; the need for social researchers to be aware that the approach they take to their research may affect change on the people they are researching. The important point was to be aware of the potential impact and to make allowance for it in the analysis of data (Cohen & Manion 1989).

From a practical point of view the most challenging part of the process was arranging the interviews. The process took time to organise and finding space in everyone's diary in a place that was easily reachable proved to be more difficult than expected, hence the final four telephone interviews. The individual

interviews and the focus groups at the six month stage had been designed to take place over a period of a month. However with individuals' work pressures, holidays and other issues the process expanded to almost three months. Surprisingly this did not appear to detract from the participants' commitment to support the study. They were always very apologetic when cancelling a date and enthusiastic about finding an alternative. What was most noticeable about all the interviews was how little encouragement was required for people to offer their contributions. For many people it would appear that this was one of the few times that someone had demonstrated an interest in their learning and its transfer.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this chapter has described the philosophy, approach and strategy for the study, justifying the decisions taken on the basis of the research aim and questions. The aim of the study was to explore the impact of organisational culture on the transfer of learning. This suggests the questions would stand at the 'intensive' (Sayer 1992) end of the research scale and would be best served by a qualitative strategy. The strategy involved a series of one to one and group, semi-structured interviews with three different sample groups. This approach provided the study with both detailed and personal experiences of learning transfer and the influences of organisational culture, together with a wider, stakeholder view of those cultures. The data were gathered through electronic recordings and note taking which were then transcribed in full. Categories and themes were identified and the coding frame

from the research data was compared with the broad framework of themes suggested by the literature.

Ethical issues concerning the Departments, the interviewees and the researcher were examined. The key issues concerned the power relations between researcher and interviewees, and confidentiality and security. These issues were managed in collaboration with the interviewees by recognising the potential for challenge and being open and transparent about how they might be dealt with. Importantly self-awareness and awareness of individual and Departmental sensitivities were recognised as essential research behaviours. The final section reflected on the overall research design and acknowledged that the size and make-up of the sample groups might limit the generalisation of the study's findings. Having clarified the methodology and justified the decisions taken, the next two chapters will examine the key findings from the data.

Chapter Four

Findings and Discussion

Introduction

This chapter will present the findings from the interviews and focus groups together with an analysis of the data. The aim of this study was to explore how organisational culture affects the transfer of a wide range of learning experiences; highlighting those systems and practices that support and/or hinder individuals applying their learning in the workplace. A review of the literature identified that the majority of previous studies had focussed on transfer from formal training courses, often from one particular course, and on specific influencing factors. The literature review explored existing theories of learning transfer and identified some limitations to their relevance when applied to the transfer of more complex forms of informal, workplace learning. This research's unique contribution has been to take a more holistic approach to learning and learning transfer and a wider view of the influencing factors.

Previous research argued the benefits of taking a systematic approach to transfer and identified line manager support and HR systems as important factors in a supportive transfer culture (Noe and Schmitt 1986; Gregoire, Propp and Poertner 1989; Burk and Baldwin 1999; Kirwan and Birchall 2006; Velada et al 2007; Burke and Hutchins 2008). This study argues that the transfer of all

types of learning, as reported in this study, is influenced strongly by a hands-off approach that encourages the development of sub-cultures and informal practices, rather than by a formal, systematic approach and direct line management support.

Research findings

This chapter will present its findings and discussions thematically, following the framework of themes which emerged from the data. Given that the interviews included both learners (senior managers and administrators) and wider Departmental stakeholders (senior leaders, HR and L&D managers) some of the emerging themes are more relevant to one group than the other; although some themes will naturally be relevant to both groups. In light of which this chapter will be organised as follows –

Firstly the chapter presents findings from the interviews with the senior managers and administrators; exploring their experiences of formal and informal learning and transfer and considering how the different types of learning were transferred. This section addresses the theme –

- *Differences/similarities in learning types and transfer*

This provides some context for the later exploration of the cultural factors that helped or hindered the transfer of learning. These findings address the subsequent question –

- ***Are different types of learning transferred in the same way?***

Secondly the chapter presents findings from the interviews and focus groups held with the senior leaders, HR and L&D managers to explore the wider stakeholder views of their Departmental culture and their perceptions of learning transfer support. The themes relevant to this group are –

- Assumptions concerning training and transfer
- The role of the line manager/formal systems
- Visibility of leaders and learning

Thirdly the chapter reverts to the findings from the interviews with the learners (senior managers and administrators) and explores individuals' perceptions of the ways in which their Department helped or hindered their learning transfer. The relevant themes for this group are –

- Assumptions concerning training and transfer
- The role of the line manager/formal systems
- The support of peers/informal practices
- Benign neglect and the role of the individual
- Visibility of leaders and learning

The chapter also explores the theme concerning the differences/similarities between Departments. These three sections all contribute to addressing the subsequent questions –

- ***What are the cultural assumptions and practices associated with learning and transfer in the civil service?***
- ***Are different types of learning transfer influenced by the same cultural aspects?***

The final chapter of the study draws conclusions from the discussion and compares the research findings with the framework/model suggested by review of the literature to suggest how existing conceptions of transfer theory might be brought up to date.

Before exploring the findings from the one to one and focus group interviews, the next section will outline briefly the outcomes of the initial telephone conversations held with the senior managers.

Initial telephone conversations with senior managers

The initial telephone interviews were held within two weeks of the senior managers completing the Base Camp leadership induction course. The purpose was to establish their motivation to apply their learning in order to provide the study with formal transfer experiences. At this time managers were asked if they would also be happy to discuss their experiences of applying informal, workplace learning during the follow-up interviews. There was no analysis made of the telephone interviews; the outcomes were very straightforward as the study was only interested in the learners' intention to

apply learning, not what they had learned or how they would apply it. Fortunately for the study all of those who had volunteered to take part in the research confirmed they believed they had learned something and their intention to transfer their learning. They confirmed too that they would be happy to discuss other forms of learning at the follow-up interview.

What was also helpful was that all 22 of those interviewed expressed very positive views of the Base Camp course during the telephone conversations, many of whom had recommended it to their colleagues. Given that Cheng and Ho's (1998) work illustrates a link between a positive learning experience and a propensity to apply learning this gave the researcher hope that there would be a range of transfer experiences to explore during the later interviews.

Learning and transfer experiences - senior managers and administrators

This section explores the variety of types of learning experienced by the learners to consider how the different types of learning were transferred. There is currently very little research concerning the transfer of informal learning. What does exist however suggests that informal learning is transferred more frequently and in a more sociable way than formal training (Enos et al 2003). This study is interested to see if its' findings corroborate this view and if the transfer of informal learning is effected by the same cultural facets as the transfer of formal training

The one to one interviews with both the senior managers and the administrators followed a similar process and included exploration of their formal and informal learning and transfer experiences. Any differences and similarities between the two groups' experiences are discussed throughout this chapter. The study recognised the possible challenge of trying to differentiate different types of learning, being aware that there is often a very fine line between them (Malcolm, Hodkinson and Colley 2003). Where necessary the typology informed by the review of literature was used as a basis for discussion (see Annex C). However this was used only to enable learners to clarify their different learning experiences, not to polarise or denigrate one type over another as Malcolm, Hodkinson and Colley (2003) have suggested can happen.

Formal learning and transfer experiences

For ease of discussion the chapter will deal separately with the formal and the informal experiences. This section will start with a review of the learning and transfer from the common leadership course (Base Camp) attended by all the senior managers. It will then explore other examples of formal learning and transfer reported by both senior managers and administrators.

Base Camp

Base Camp is a leadership induction course, designed to offer new senior managers ideas and techniques for understanding and managing their new

roles and developing their new teams. It explains the political context in which they will be working and the major challenges they will face. The key method of delivery is one of 'leaders teaching leaders', with much of the input led by senior leaders in the civil service as expert practitioners. All 22 of the senior managers attended this course during July 2009 and did so, according to their responses in the interviews, as part of their long term leadership development plan.

The initial telephone conversations had identified that all the senior managers were motivated to transfer learning from this course, although in the follow-up one to one interviews only 15 of the senior managers reported having done what they planned to do; others said they were still looking for opportunities in which to do some of the things they had planned. However all 22 reported that the course had either changed the way in which they thought about their leadership role or changed their behaviour in some way. This was of great interest to the study given the figure of 10% that is often quoted (Curry, Caplan and Knuppel 1994) as the amount of learning transferred into the workplace. In fact these findings were more reflective of the 62% quoted by Saks and Belcourt (2006). There was a concern that the learners were shaping their experiences to satisfy the researcher; however when prompted for specific examples of how they had applied their learning, these were forthcoming. Several of the learners did acknowledge that knowing about the forthcoming interview had in some way focussed their minds and that being aware of the study had encouraged their reflections and their application of learning.

'I knew you would be coming back to talk with me, so last week I made some notes about what I had done since Base Camp. It was interesting to compare them with the action planning notes I made at the time. There are still some things left to do' (C5).

'Knowing about your study probably made me more aware of what I was doing as a result of Base Camp. I got out the notes I made at the time yesterday and it was helpful to be able to reflect on what I'd learned and what I'd done, and not done' (A6).

The first finding from this study was that keeping new learning at the forefront of the learner's mind was one way to encourage transfer. A further finding was how few examples of 'near' (Detterman 1993) and 'direct' (Nikandrou et al 2008) learning and transfer were reported from Base Camp. The only examples offered that might be described as 'near' or 'direct' were those concerned with a session delivered by the head of the civil service, Gus O'Donnell. Gus explained to the group how, when he took up his new role, he had used the support of a coach to help him develop and improve his leadership skills. This message was taken and acted upon by several of those interviewed, although they still went about contextualising it for their own needs, rather than simply replicating it:

'I was so surprised to hear Gus explain that he had a coach, at his level. I thought when you got that far in the business you didn't need that sort of thing.

It made me think seriously about it and now I am having some coaching sessions' (D1).

'I had always thought that coaching was for new managers but it was interesting to hear GD's take on it and how valuable he found it. I am talking to our HR about how I get a coach and my mentor says it's a good idea too' (B2)

'I had some coaching when I first joined this Department, but have done nothing about it since. Gus's talk made me remember how much I valued those sessions and I'm planning to pick it up again very soon' (A4)

These examples help to demonstrate the important influence of senior leaders in encouraging learning and application, as suggested by both Buss (2005) and Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe (2006). The role of the senior leaders in learning and transfer is explored further later in this chapter.

The study found that the majority of transfer examples reported reflected the 'far' and 'indirect' types of learning transfer. The far transfer examples were understandable because although the course was designed specifically for senior managers newly promoted or recruited to the senior civil service, it was also designed to be generic and cross-departmental. As a result, the researcher had anticipated finding examples of participants needing to contextualise their learning for transfer to their specific Department and role. However, a key finding was just how much of the learning and transfer described was from 'indirect' means. Examples were given of learning from the process of delivery, such as the story-telling by senior leaders, and from

informal discussions with peers and speakers. Many of the learners said that the personal stories told by senior leaders had encouraged them to use the technique with their own teams, as three learners explained:

'On my return to work I used the story-telling method with my team. I asked them what they thought were the stories they wanted this Department to be telling about our team and our work in a year's time. Together we built our own stories and started to tell them outside the team. It helped to identify what was important for us and it was fun' (A12).

'The power of story-telling was important for me – seeing the methods in practice, it made it all so much more accessible. What I observed was leaders using story-telling as the means of getting things done. I now understand that it's about developing those stories and introducing them to my team' (C4).

'I've learned that it is so much more valuable to tell stories, rather than just tell people what we do and why. The facts are important, but the stories get the feelings and emotions across too, this is something we don't always think about here. I think we are a bit afraid of emotions in the civil service, but I'm trying it out anyway' (A9).

Much of the indirect learning transfer gained through informal discussions concerned how to challenge Departmental norms, the value of developing internal and external networks and the importance of being brave and of

relaxing control with their teams, all learned through discussions and stories, rather than direct input:

'I learned the importance of building external relationships. It was helpful to discuss with colleagues how they look outside their Departments and how they manage relationships with their Ministers I felt more equipped to start building my own networks now.' (A1)

'The networking was fantastic; seeing it work in practice; it forced you into replicating it back in the workplace, to build your own support among peers and staff. I've also begun to do something similar with colleagues from other Departments' (C1)

'I learned that I didn't have to do it all myself, that was a big eye opener for me. Talking with others on the course showed me how to be braver and to trust my team to deliver' (C4).

Finally there were some examples from the course of 'indirect' learning from personal reflections, rather than input, either formal or informal –

'I felt the programme gave me permission to stand up to senior people and learn that the sky would not fall in if I did. I've been much braver in my conversations with my bosses since' (A6).

'What I learned was that I am not the only person who feels totally out of their depth at times, and that there are others in the same boat. This has helped me to be stronger in how I manage my new and rather challenging team' (D1).

Other formal experiences

Further examples of formal learning and transfer experiences from both the senior managers and the administrators concerned a range of training courses. Some of them had been sponsored by their Departments to take degrees, MBAs and professional qualifications. For others the training was provided by the Department's own L&D function and included professional master classes, coaching and personal development courses. Much of the formal training was reported to be part of a long term development plan, rather than to address immediate learning needs. However the amount of training available appeared to be dependent on the specific Department with learners from Department A reporting the widest range:

'This Department is very forward looking. It has a fabulous range of L&D activities that you can just tap into. There is always something going on and we are encouraged to choose our own options' (A2).

'I've been offered a lot of formal learning since joining this Department from university; post grad stuff, law society exams and then ongoing legal training, as well as internal management training courses' (A1).

Those who joined the service through the Fast Stream (graduate recruitment) were provided with specifically tailored training during their first few years. Fast streamers were also offered opportunities to take part in academic programmes and training courses to develop their professional skills, such a law, accountancy or H.R.

The following table (4.1) summarizes the formal training experiences reported by all the learners. Some reported more than one experience, especially the senior managers in Departments A and C who had all attended Base Camp as well as leadership programmes run by their Departments.

A summary of reported instances of formal training experiences

Training event	A	B	C	D	E	Total
Fast Stream	3	2	1			6
Sponsored Degree/Masters/MBA	4	1	2		1	8
Technical training, including Lean techniques	2	1	1		3	7
Professional training and continuing professional development	4	2	3			9
Leadership/management training	12	2	5	1		20
Base Camp	12	3	5	2		22
Master classes	9	2				11
Introduction to the civil service	2	1	1			4
Total instances of training	48	14	18	3	4	87

Table 4.1

The learning transfer from these other formal training interventions reflected the experiences of those who attended Base Camp. Learners described the challenge of transferring learning directly from a generic training course and of gaining useful skills and knowledge through informal conversations with other participants. There was however a noticeable difference between transfer from generic training and from tailored courses. The learners who attended specifically tailored training, such as induction programmes and some specific skills training, were more likely to describe examples of near or direct transfer:

'There is a one day compulsory course run by the department that gives you the history of the civil service and its relationship with government, it helps you to understand how it all works. This was really helpful to me as a new boy. It helped me to understand the history and start to use the language of the place which enabled me to fit in to this different world' (B3).

'I came in through the fast stream entry route and took all the new entrant courses they provided. The things we learned on the induction courses were all really useful, I could make use of most of the information they gave us and it helped me to find my feet and understand how things worked around here' (A4).

Two of the administrators reported attending an IT course specifically tailored to the new electronic booking system that had just been introduced into their workplace. They reported that as the training was tailored specifically to the new system, it made transferring their learning more straightforward:

'The two days were very useful and because it was all about the specific IT processes I would be using at work, I could use the material straight away. Although it was often difficult to remember it all when I got back, they did give us a manual to crib from, which helped' (E4)

However one of them also explained how much of her learning transfer was also aided by being able to have conversations with her colleague:

'I found the training useful and I was certainly able to use it all when we got back to the office. What really helped me was that we went together. It helped to have someone to talk to, to make sense of it all. And when we got back to work, at least one of us could remember what to do next' (E2).

Learners reported that the biggest challenge to applying their learning from formal training courses was the lack of any immediate relevance of what they had been taught to what they were expected to do or able to do at work.

Belling et al (2003) suggest that the perceived relevance of any learning to the immediate work environment is an important factor in influencing successful transfer. The reverse can also be true; a lack of perceived relevance made it difficult for many of the interviewees to contextualise their learning and apply it. The ineffectiveness of the formal systems had a clear impact on the quality and quantity of transfer that occurred:

'I was funded to take a professional marketing qualification, but so much of what we were taught on the course was related to the private sector. We are

very different here; it was hard to make it fit and there was no one here who could really help' (B1)

'I came back from my finance training all full of enthusiasm to make changes but that's not so easy when the structure and systems we use are so different to those used in the case studies. Even our accounts manager couldn't really advise me!' (A10).

However, despite not understanding the immediate relevance and being able to directly transfer their formal training, learners did report examples of 'indirect' and 'far' transfer:

'The MA was excellent personal development, but much of it is not really relevant to my current role. What was useful though was talking to others on the course about how this stuff worked in their world. It gave me some ideas about how I might do things in the future' (A4).

'I missed out on going to university first time around and this has been great. I've learned about how other businesses organise themselves and have tried to introduce some of that learning back here, especially how I manage performance. I also feel that I can contribute to things outside my day job now, like the strategy planning. Not all of it can be applied, because they talked more about the private sector at university and some of the things they do, we can't' (E6).

'I enjoyed my Lean training and I can see how useful all the techniques can be in a technical, mechanistic business, but we are a people business and some of the tools don't work with what we do. I have tried amending some of the communication methods we were taught and they are beginning to work really well. It took some thinking about and it takes time to change how we do things'.
(E5).

As with the learning and transfer from Base Camp, this study found that learners attending other formal training courses, especially academic and generic development courses, reported more examples of 'far' and 'indirect' learning transfer, than 'near' and 'direct'. Their examples included what they had learned from discussion with other participants rather than from the taught content and how they had adapted their learning to their environment, most often without direct organisational support. There were also examples of how personal reflection had supported their learning transfer, either individually with the support of peers and colleagues:

'It was one of those leadership courses set up to help you to develop trust in the team but most of the really useful learning, things I could actually do, came from us wandering around the gardens talking to each other, not in the classroom' (A12).

'I had the advantage of attending the advanced commander staff course as a civilian. I loved it. But in terms of being able to conduct and execute campaign

planning, I had to take those lessons, think about them and apply them to a civil service environment; refining the language so to speak' (C5).

Those learners who attended specific skills training, such as the IT course attended by the two administrators, reported transfer examples more directly related to the taught content of the course. The two administrators suggested that transfer was made easier because the course had been designed specifically for the type of work they were doing:

'The new IT system was in place when we got back to work, so we had to apply our new learning. The timing for the learning was important for me too. It meant I could do something with the material before I forgot it' (E4).

The issue of immediate relevance to the workplace was also reported by a senior manager attending an introduction to the civil service course:

'I attended the course in my first month of being in the service, which meant that I could see that everything I learned was valuable and I could really make use of it, even though it might need a bit of tweaking for my Department' (B3).

An early opportunity to apply any learning also proved helpful as one of the senior managers described when talking about a management development course he had recently attended:

'The training course came at just the right time for me and I was able to make use of what I had learned when I ran our staff learning day the following week. I could pass on all the team building stuff which really helped to bring the team together' (A11).

Without that perceived relevance or timeliness many learners reported that their formal training *'just disappeared'* (B3); for example two learners reported:

'Base camp, it was a very inspirational course and the speakers were great, but I can't immediately think how I can use many of those ideas in my current role, what I do is so different to those who were speaking' (A3).

'As a new manager I attended one of those really emotional management development courses. You know the ones where you become more self aware and genuinely recognise the impact you have on others. We really bonded as a team. You learned to trust the group and it was great for the two weeks. But of course when you get back to work, the people are different and the situations are different and I couldn't see how I could introduce any of the stuff we did, so much of it vanished' (A12).

These examples reflect the findings from Baumgartel et al (1984) and Lim and Johnson's (2002: 42) studies, both of which identified an early opportunity to use new learning as the primary reason for transfer and the lack of opportunity as the key reason for non-transfer. The most commonly reported challenge to the transfer of formal training was that so much of the learning was generic,

rather than specific, and that it occurred away from the workplace. This placed the responsibility on the learners to contextualise their learning before being able to make use of it. One manager explained his experience of attending a management development course:

'They talked a great deal about the importance of creating support networks for teams and I thought this would be something I could use with my new team. However I had to think deeply about how I could do it. It wasn't something I could just go ahead and do; it needed some thinking about how it would work here, we are quite a different group of people' (C5).

Another manager explained that whilst she wanted to use the story-telling methods she had observed on Base Camp she needed to consider how to transfer the practice effectively before doing so:

'I did an away day which was based on some of the things I had learned about on Base Camp, which actually went down quite well. However I had had to translate what I was doing into Departmental language to encourage others to go along with it all' (A11).

What also became clear from the examples reported was that the learning transfer was also strongly linked to the learners' own motivation, ability and autonomy to be able to apply their learning:

'There was no formal process for sharing things on my return to the Department so I set up a couple of presentations for colleagues and my team to share my learning with them. I wanted to test out how some of my thinking would work here' (A9).

'Setting up the network group, I certainly did not ask permission, I just started talking to people and it worked. Now even my Permanent Secretary recognises the group' (B2).

The findings from the study so far reflect many of the current theories of learning transfer; including the importance of timeliness and relevance and the individual's personal ability and autonomy to be able to transfer. The examples described from Base Camp illustrated the role of senior leaders in encouraging learning and transfer. The majority of the experiences reported concerned generic training which required the learner to reflect and contextualise their learning before application. Much of the learning that was transferred from formal courses tended to fit the 'indirect' or 'far' model; in particular learning gained through discussions with other participants. Those who attended specifically tailored skills training were more able to describe examples of direct transfer. Moving on, the chapter now explores the learners' experiences of informal, workplace learning transfer.

Informal, workplace learning and transfer experiences

Examples of informal, workplace learning reported by both managers and administrators tended to be focussed on addressing specific workplace learning needs, including how to carry out new tasks and how to improve their performance. Some of the examples were initially challenging to identify, particularly when trying to identify examples of the unconscious, invisible and unintended types of learning and transfer. Using the typology (Annex C) helped to clarify what that learning might involve and encouraging learners to discuss how they learned to do what they do at work on a daily basis gave some context for the discussion.

Reported methods of informal, workplace learning

- Working closely with more experienced peers
- On-the-job training from managers and colleagues
- Observing a more skilled colleague or senior leader
- Job-shadowing someone else in the business
- Conversations with a variety of people – peers, leaders and staff
- Meeting and talking with people from outside the Department
- Osmosis or '*just being there*' (E3)
- Listening
- Personal reflection and time to think

Examples of informal learning and transfer learning from both the managers and the administrators included:

'I learn from what I see and I have learned good management skills from quite junior members of staff. Observing how they do things and how successful they've been has changed how I behave as a leader' (B2).

'There is no simple way into any of this stuff and I've relied very heavily on learning from the very expert team I inherited. I listen and ask lots of questions and then test my new thinking with the team before putting it into practice' (A4).

'I learn mainly by talking to people. So whether that's colleagues, peers or work partners – actually that's a kind of constant thing we have going – talking and discussing - whether it's a management or a legal issue. It's all about trying to make sure we share our knowledge' (A1)

One of the most frequently reported type of informal learning was 'by osmosis' or as two managers described:

'I learned a lot about this Department and how to do the job by just soaking it all up, watching and being part of it all. Then you start to realise that you can do some of this stuff and you're not sure how it happened' (A9).

'I am very new in post and in the service so much of my learning has been about how I manage my new environment, rather than new skills. I do much of

my learning through being around new people, observing them and my own reflections. Then I try things out to see what happens and try something else if it doesn't work' (C2).

Many of those interviewed also described how important it was for their learning and application to observe or work with their senior leaders in various situations:

'I work closely to my Director and I've learned some different approaches by observing her in meetings I now make good use of these approaches, especially when I'm leading meetings that involve internal senior people or those from other Departments (A10).

'My boss is fantastic, a real role model in the way he leads meetings and works with stakeholders. I've learned a great deal just by watching him and what he does and says. I am more confident in dealing with external stakeholders now because I've seen that what he does works' (B3).

'I think about watching my boss and how he acts and the impact that has on everyone he interacts with. I find it really helpful to observe someone successful and then to think about how I might change my behaviour. It's helped me plan how I lead my new team. I've learned some good skills to use' (A4).

These examples reflect the perceived value of the behaviour and activities of senior leaders to the learning and transfer process. For others their informal

learning was characterised by less overt management support but which was seen as just as fruitful, as another manager explained:

'For the first 6 months in my new job everything I did got 'red lined'. (sent back for reworking) I worked for someone with incredibly high standards, but I have to say that was a job that completely changed me and taught me so much once I had got through the first 6 months. He didn't really train me, it was just that his style was very interactive; we would discuss issues then I would go away and put it all into practice' (A11).

Whereas the formal training that had been described was often undertaken as part of a longer term development plan, informal learning was more regularly seen as an immediate solution to a knowledge or skills gap. Many of the examples of informal learning and transfer had resulted from the learner proactively identifying a personal need for new expertise or skills development and then seeking out a suitable person or intervention to fill the gap:

'I work closely with my job-share partner, she's been in the department much longer than me and I talk to her when I need to learn more about my new role. She is very supportive and it means that everything I learn from her I can use in the job. She's also very encouraging when I do things differently, which helps' (A1).

'If I have identified a particular training need, I find a solution, and fix it. ... And I think that's a reasonable approach' (D1).

'I needed to learn about project management and I had an incredibly good Band A in my team who was leading a key project. I went to her for advice; actually, it was pressured, on-the-job training. She was the expert and I learned a lot about those skills but I also learned how to let go and let others shine. It's like the 'casting a shadow' stuff we talked about on Base Camp' (B1).

Alternatively many of the senior managers had coaches and mentors, who helped them to identify their learning needs and supported them to apply their new learning:

'It was like having someone entirely on your side, you could run things past him for support. He didn't tell you what to do, but just having him there listening helped me to think things through for myself. Then I could go and do something new knowing it wasn't completely off the wall or dangerous!' (B2)

The more invisible, unintentional types of learning and transfer reported were also very personally focussed. Much of this type of learning came from unintentional experiences which brought about a change of thinking or behaviour. These unintentional experiences tended to occur during conversations with or observations of others. The challenge for the learners was to identify the learning from these unintentional experiences in order to transfer their learning; particularly when they had not considered it a learning experience in the first place. With the opportunity for reflection created by the interviews, many of them said how much they had begun to recognise their own informal learning styles and methods:

'I realise now that this how I learn. I carry a note book everywhere and if something comes up I can ask the question later. I do ask a lot of questions, it probably drives people mad but it's the best way for me to absorb new things' (D1).

'We have a lot of conversations in this team; we talk to each other a lot, whether it's part of formal meetings or just informal as you are walking together. I realise now that I learn most from what people say and how they say it' (A5)
'My learning is mainly through talking with people; we've got a constant discussion thing going with peers and colleagues here in the Department and it's amazing how much you learn from just talking' (A1)

This sociable side of informal learning is something that Enos et al (2003) identified as important for transfer. This study found that where learners had the opportunity to make their learning visible, through sociable conversations, coaching or reflective practices, they were able to use their learning much more efficiently. Davenport and Prusak (1998) argued that in a supportive environment learning can become embedded through such incidental social interactions in the workplace and this study would support that argument:

'It helped me to talk my thinking and learning through with other people, to make sure I understood what needed doing, before trying it out for real' (E3)

Informal learning transfer examples included conscious reflection and experimentation as well as unconscious practice:

'I am not sure how I learned to manage the booking system; No one taught me formally, I just picked it up over time and with practice. I like to try new things out and just learn from the circumstances in which I find myself', (E1).

The transfer examples from informal learning also reflected Enos et al's findings in that they tended to happen more frequently and more quickly. The time between informal learning and transfer tended to be much shorter than between formal learning and transfer, where there was a greater need for contextualisation. Where learners gave examples of informal transfer they often described the application as part of the learning process and vice versa. Having learned something new they simply incorporated the new knowledge and skills into their work:

'I didn't really think about it, I just did it like that next time' (C4)

'I just got on with it then' (E3)

'I did it for real next time I had the chance' (B2).

The immediate requirement for the knowledge or skill often meant that the transfer process was much more fluid and less segmented than the '**learning – contextualising/generalising – transferring**' process suggested by existing theory. Many of the learners were also describing the concept of 'heuristic' knowledge identified by Tsoukas (2001:988) where they extemporised their

new knowledge and skills based on personal experiences, amending them as they became more familiar.

Baumgartel et al (1984) argued that personal autonomy was an important factor in the transfer of learning. This study found that personal autonomy was of particular relevance for informal learning and transfer because in these cases individuals often had to identify their own learning needs, source a method of learning, and make their own opportunities to transfer:

'If I have identified a learning need, I find a solution, and fix it. It's part of how we do things here. You learn how to do your job while you're doing it. You learn from others and from your team. You rarely get to go anywhere to learn' (D1).

All the learners in this study were able to describe an instance where they had identified a learning requirement and then sourced an informal way of meeting that need, without any external intervention. Their personal autonomy, even among the administrators, meant they were able to move from *'needing to learn'* to *'applying new learning'* in a short space of time; in some cases simultaneously. Formal training required the learners to follow an organisational process; acquiring approval from line managers or funding from HR. Informal learning did not have these external processes attached to them; it was a case of learning something, or recognising that one had learned something, and then putting it into practice. As much of the informal learning was done to address a specific, often urgent need, the opportunity to transfer

was already there. Learners gave examples where they had needed to learn something new quickly, the learning was done informally, and then transferred directly:

'I knew I would have to do this as part of my new job, so I watched my colleague complete the forms on-line then she watched me do it, after that, it was my job. It was trial and error, but I got it right in the end' (E3)

'Having observed my boss's boss running his meetings, I tried some of the same techniques the following day when I met with my new team. It really helped having seen the techniques in action, I'd got a good idea that they would work' (C4).

'When I took over a company as part of my new role I went straight out to learn about company law. There wasn't a suitable course and there wasn't time anyway. I bought a book and found an expert in the Department to talk to. It worked, within a month I felt able to go and talk confidently to our lawyers' (B1).

'My new team manages all the contracts the Department has with a large number of private sector Departments. When I joined the team I had no commercial experience at all, and a big part of this job is commercial. So I learned from coaching by my grade 6. That worked much better than going on a course. I don't profess to be an expert now, but I can understand when I'm in a meeting what's being discussed and why' (D1)

As well as illustrating the importance of individual autonomy (Axtell et al's 1997), these examples also illustrate Belling et al's (2003) theory that the perceived relevance of the learning to one's immediate work environment is important for the transfer of that learning. In each of these cases the learning was seen by the learner as immediately relevant, as well as, in some cases, urgent. They are also illustrative of Baumgartel et al's (1984) findings concerning the importance of an early opportunity to apply learning. In all of these cases the time between the need to know or do something and the learning was relatively short and there was already an identified gap into which the learning could be transferred. In some of the instances that were described the learning and transfer happened concurrently, and, as Eraut (2002) described, learning and work became the same thing. One manager reported needing to learn about financial management:

'There was no time for me to sort out a formal training course; there wasn't the funding for it anyway. Fortunately I had a highly effective finance manager on my team, so I got her to teach me all she knew and help me to put it into practice. It saved time too; I could apply my learning as I went along, when I needed to, rather than waiting for the end of a course' (B2).

Summary of learning and transfer experiences

A review of the learners' learning and transfer experiences has enabled this study to explore the question:

- ***Are different types of learning transferred in the same way?***

This study would argue that there are more similarities than differences in the ways in which different types of learning are transferred. One important finding that emerged from this study was the correlation with the 'indirect' style of transfer described by Nikandrou et al (2008). In fact the 'indirect' style was found to be predominant among the transfer of both formal and informal learning. In some cases the transfer reported from specifically tailored formal skills training and some informal skills development activities could be described as 'direct'. However from formal training courses and the informal personal development activities, almost all of the transfer reported reflected the 'indirect' model.

These findings also reflect Detterman's (1993) 'near' and 'far' transfer styles, although they add a slightly different dimension. The ways in which the learners described transferring their learning was not simply that the learning was applied in the same way, every time ('near') or that the learning needed to be contextualised ('far'). They also described learning that was either physically 'near' to the point of application or physically 'far' away, both in time and space. Although this was more of a sliding scale, than a strict either/or dichotomy, it was evident that the closer the learning was to the point of application, physically as well as in time, the more straightforward it was to transfer. This reflects Enos et al's (2003: 381) view that learning and transfer are a continuous process.

Much of the informal, workplace learning reported by the learners was perceived as simply a part of their work. The learning was often in response to an immediate need for specific knowledge or skills and took place within the workplace, reflecting Billett's (2001: 21) description that '*learning and working are interdependent*'. In such cases the learning was already contextualised and the opportunities for transfer were visible. These reported examples resonated with Lim and Johnson's (2002) finding that an early opportunity to use new learning will contribute positively to its transfer. Knowing there was a 'gap' into which the learning could be transferred helped to provide that important early opportunity. The findings also supported Baumgartel et al's (1984) theory of perceived relevance. However learners also described translating or adapting their learning and skills for their specific needs. Much of the reported transfer was described as an ongoing process, rather than a discrete event. Learners would often modify and polish their knowledge and skills in the work place so that learning and application became an iterative process, reflective of Tsoukas' (2001:988) 'heuristic' knowledge. All of which applied to both formal and informal learning experiences.

Whilst these findings reflect some of the existing theories they also describe a more complex picture of the transfer process. The experiences described in this study, from both formal and informal learning, were of a more flexible and often more social nature than many of the models allow. The learners described a range of private and social activities in which they reflected individually or interacted with others to transfer their learning through conversation, support, practice, trial and error. Many described a concurrent,

often unconscious process of learning and transfer, carried out alongside their work, rather than a conscious, deliberate act. This study will argue that models of learning transfer need to accommodate the complexity demonstrated by these findings. Hager and Hodkinson (2009) have already identified that the term transfer is too simplistic to describe such a wide array of processes and too reflective of the 'empty vessel' (Piaget 1926) school of thought. This study agrees with them and with Lave's (1996: 151) argument that:

'Transfer is an extraordinarily narrow and barren account of how knowledgeable persons make their way among multiple interrelated settings.'

By reviewing their learning and transfer experiences this section has set the context in which the learners' perceptions of how the Departments' culture helped or hindered the transfer process can be explored later in this chapter. The next section presents the findings from the interviews with the stakeholders (senior leaders, HR and L&D managers) and analyses their perspectives of the organisational culture and learning transfer in their Departments.

Stakeholder findings - senior leaders, HR and L&D manager interviews and focus groups

A selection of senior leaders, HR and L&D managers were interviewed across four of the five Departments (A, B, C & D) to explore their perceptions of learning and transfer in their Departments, to gain a wider stakeholder view of the Departments' assumptions and practices and *'to include some of the*

complexity of whole situations' (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe 2002:30).

This section presents findings relating to the following themes:

- Departmental assumptions about training and transfer
- The role of the line manager/formal systems
- Visibility of learning and leaders

Departmental assumptions about training and transfer

Discussions regarding Departmental assumptions about training and transfer produced a consistency of responses concerning three assumptions - the value of training, the responsibility for transfer and the importance of senior leader involvement. The visible practices that reflect these assumptions will be explored throughout this chapter.

All the Stakeholders reported a common assumption that training was considered important in their Department:

'We all know it's important and that you have to throw money at it and if people want to go on training then they should be able to' (A13)

'We have a huge focus on learning, it's very important. Each directorate has an L&D plan and a bespoke L&D business partner' (B4)

'There is an assumption about training in this Department. There is a story that there is a lot of it about. There is a story that you can develop both

professionally and in career terms in this department and that we provide an excellent quality of training because we think it's important' (B9).

'We spend a lot of our time and resources developing our leaders. Recently we brought in a professor from Harvard Business School to work alongside our own teaching staff, it's important to us all' (C5)

'We bring in high profile speakers and encourage everyone to attend. We also fund coaching for those who want it. We have to demonstrate to our Perm Sec that everyone is engaged with learning' (D3)

They were all clear that training was an important part of their Department's strategy and described a variety of formal systems designed to support training, underpinned by substantial budgets. They reported that training was made available for all staff; although in three cases the training budgets were devolved to the line managers who made the major spending decisions. All four Departments had their own experienced L&D teams who provided a range of internal training interventions, and sourced external provision as required. Department C has its own training Academy delivering many of the management and leadership courses. One HR manager also offered an example of how staff had on occasion taken this shared assumption to extreme:

'There was even a time in this Department when people felt that training was so valuable that they had an entitlement to two weeks of training, same as their

annual leave. There is still an assumption in the Department that individuals have the right to training, including personal development' (A14).

Assumptions about the transfer of learning also became clear during the discussions. The stakeholders assumed it was the shared responsibility of the individual and their line manager to ensure that training was applied in the workplace; but that HR and L&D would provide a range of organisational-wide systems to support, monitor and enable this to happen:

'We've moved to a model where you don't have personnel managers so now it's the line manager's responsibility; we provide the mechanisms to support them' (A14).

'It's the line manager's role but sometimes they don't have the relationship or in fact know enough about learning and that's when we offer to help and support them' (B7)

There was a wide range of formal systems in place to manage the transfer process in all the Departments; however the practical application of these systems varied which will be explored later in this section.

The third assumption identified by this group was the value attributed to senior leadership recognition. It was assumed by all stakeholders that whatever their senior leaders paid attention to others in the Department would do so as well, including training:

'If you involve senior people from the start then it helps people see that training is valued here. We do this on our new leaders programme; we invite participants to bring their manager with them to the first briefing meeting so they can be involved from the start. It helps when their staff get back to the workplace, they can work out together how to apply learning' (A14)

Having identified the underlying assumptions held by the stakeholders, the next section explores the formal systems and practices reflecting those assumptions.

The role of the line manager/formal systems

This section presents the findings regarding the role of the line manager and the formal systems in supporting learning transfer. It does not attempt to separate the formal systems from the role of the line manager because in reality many of the HR practices relied heavily on the line manager to carry them out. However the section does include other centrally managed processes designed to support learning transfer.

According to much of the research in this area (Huczynski and Lewis 1980; Noe and Schmitt 1986; Wright and Fraser 1987; Baldwin and Ford 1988; Tracy et al 1995; Lim and Johnson 2002) the role of the line manager is a key positive factor in the transfer and application of learning in a Department. The positive influence of the line manager is most often made visible through the provision of opportunities to learn as well as the support for transferring learning. The

feedback offered by line managers to encourage learners to apply their learning and positive line management behaviours have been suggested as the foundation of a positive learning climate (Baldwin and Ford 1988). Gregoire, Propp and Poertner (1998) also suggested that it is the combination of a motivated line manager and effective Departmental support systems that encourages the application of learning.

All of the stakeholders in this study described a variety of formal systems designed to support both the learner and their line manager in the transfer of learning. In most Departments the appraisal system was the key mechanism for this process because it included a review of training activities and discussions regarding future needs. All Departments had some form of electronic system to support individuals and their line managers to manage their performance and their training. However in the case of Departments B and D the process for reviewing training was separated from the review of performance:

'It's hard to talk about training needs and application when someone is measuring your performance for a bonus, so training is separated out and we discuss it separately' (B4).

'People are reluctant to admit to their line managers that they have learning needs, because it all links to the pay system and rewards. So we, the HR team, have coaching sessions which operate completely separately from the performance review by their line managers' (D3).

In the Departments where the review of training was devolved to the line manager; there were varying levels of support offered from both HR and L&D teams. For example Department B's L&D team offered support for both staff and their line managers and the emphasis was on encouraging discussions between them regarding the application of learning.

'We have a very detailed process to support the learning and transfer process. We send an email reminder designed to prompt staff to discuss their learning and application with their line manager following a training event. After 6 months we conduct a follow up phone call with the line manager to discuss what been done and what other learning needs have been identified. We are very keen to develop the line manager's role in the whole process and we encourage them to hold pre and post course conversations with their staff' (B6).

Department C's L&D team also provided a range of formal support systems for learning transfer; however they took a more hands on approach.

'After any training course we contact the line manager and the individual to see if there has been a behavioural change. We pick a cohort each year and after 4 or 5 months we go back and ask the individuals how have they have used their learning. We also go back 9 – 12 months later and they redo their 360 feedback and we compare the two to see if there is a behaviour shift. We also go back to the line managers and ask again have they seen the behavioural shift in the way their staff lead their teams' (C7)

As well as the appraisal and performance review practices, two of the Departments' L&D teams had begun to contextualise their internally provided training with a view to helping participants apply their learning. Departments A and B had developed tailored, informal sessions delivered by professionally qualified and experienced members of specialist teams rather than by an L&D professional:

'We deliberately use the internal subject matter experts to give credibility to what we are trying to teach. Participants will listen to them and they are more able to make the connections because the experts talk about this business, not communications in general. I think it's really important to have the people who really know what they are doing, delivering the training' (B4).

'We do something called 'Talking shop', organised by our Communication people who recruit very credible internal speakers for bite sized training sessions. They talk about a range of current issues, it's always timely and they are usually packed out' (A14).

Working along-side the L&D teams, these internal specialists have become a professionalised version of 'Nellie', only this time Nellie has some support.

Whilst the formal practices reflected the shared assumption that training is an important part of the business, the assumptions concerning transfer varied slightly. It was assumed by all stakeholders to be the line manager and the individual's responsibility, supported by HR. However the ways in which the

activities were carried out illustrated minor differences in their approaches. Departments A and B took the approach that learning and transfer was the shared responsibility of the learner and their line manager, with HR playing only a minor role:

'We see the line manager as having the conversations with their staff about their training and how it's applied in the workplace. We offer support and advice and in some cases a reminder service, but these days we are not responsible for performance management, only to ensure that the line manager and their staff have the right level of information to do it for themselves' (B5).

'Everyone is supposed to look at what their development requirements are and talk to their line manager about their gaps, through the performance appraisal process. Then you review them all with your manager, to talk about how you've used your training. We only get involved with new managers when they need training and with collating the resulting information' (A13)

Departments C's approach to learning and transfer was more 'hands on', illustrated by the complex, trainer centred follow up system that they employ, highlighted earlier. Department D's HR team also took a more 'hands on' approach, but for different reasons:

'We do operate the appraisal process, which looks at training too, and there ought to be discussions with managers about individual learning needs, but it hasn't always worked as we hoped. Our culture is not ready yet for people to

say “I’m not very good at this” and people say that if they expose their development needs then they are talking themselves out of a bonus or a promotion. So we are much more involved than perhaps HR would be in any other Department and some of the development conversations are with me and I provide the Board with recommendations’ (D3).

As well as the systems for performance and training reviews there were also other formal systems that were identified as being supportive of training transfer, including the departmental fast stream programmes and financial reward systems.

Graduate and High Potential Schemes

The HR and L&D teams were responsible for the management of a variety of Fast Stream and High Potential schemes run by the Departments. These schemes focus on the development of individuals who have been identified as having potential to take up senior roles quickly. Individuals recruited to these schemes take part in a staged training process throughout their time in the Department, although each Department manages its scheme differently. The training opportunities available to those on the schemes were considered to be of greater value than those available more widely and often included post-graduate university qualifications; action learning sets facilitated by Permanent Secretaries and overseas exchange programmes with other Governments. However despite the wide range of learning opportunities, only Department A

was able to report how individuals on their scheme were encouraged to transfer their new learning formally.

'As part of the programme we offer individuals an opportunity to attend a session with the senior leadership team. During this session they are asked to talk about their learning and how they plan to apply that learning to help them deliver success for the Department. There is a follow up interview later where they present their activities to date' (A13).

Other Departments relied on the existing mechanisms of appraisal and line manager support.

Financial systems

Alongside these HR/L&D practices, two other formal activities are also suggested by the literature to contribute towards a supportive environment for learning transfer, although they are closely linked. One is funding and the other is the reward and recognition system. How an organisation chooses to spend its money reflects an underlying assumption of what is valuable to that organisation. Budget restriction is a factor only recently identified by Lim and Johnson (2002) as having an impact on the transfer of learning. During this study stakeholders in particular reported that following the general election budget cuts had begun to reduce not only the amount of money for training but also the number of days that people could be released from their job to attend training.

'We are finding it much harder to justify sending people on expensive leadership courses, academic programmes and overseas study courses these days. We've had to centralise of our training budget and this means managers have lost control of spending. We are now running more internal courses ourselves' (B6).

However on the plus side, one manager did suggest that this lack of funding might encourage managers to ensure that there was a transfer of learning:

'There is a funding issue now which will make it really interesting and it will make line managers really think and instead of saying "you're a good egg, of course a masters will help with your career", it's going to be more "so how are you going to apply all of that then?" It will be interesting!' (B5).

Holton et al's (1997: 110) research identified a link between the transfer of learning and *'positive outcomes or pay-offs for the individual'*. This study found only one example of a direct link between training and financial reward where Departments B and C had a practice of rewarding individuals with a bonus payment when they qualified as an accountant. However all the HR managers argued that any *'pay-off'* was more likely to be deferred than direct and more closely linked to long term career and promotional prospects. One manager explained:

'You put the investment in and you make yourself a better person and more promotable; but learning is rarely rewarded at the immediate point of delivery' (C7).

The following section considers the role of the senior leaders in training and transfer.

The visibility leaders and learning

The third assumption reported by all the stakeholders was that the opinion of senior leaders was considered to be of great importance, and that this applied to learning as to everything else. The visibility of leaders and their involvement in training were themes that emerged from all interviews. The stakeholders reported that senior leaders' behaviours influenced individuals' perceptions of training. As a result all HR and L&D teams encouraged the participation of senior leaders in their internal leadership and management training, both informal and formal.

'We try to encourage everyone to understand that learning is something we all need to do, then we hope that some of that learning will find its way into the workplace. We want to change behaviours but we have to start with encouraging people to see learning as a normal activity. To do this we show that the most senior people are engaged with learning' (D3).

'I recognise that this Department invests a great deal in learning. We believe in the value of training. We try to ensure that senior leaders are involved in the delivery of the training in some way, even if it's only to open the course or come and talk with participants at lunch time. We see this as recognition by the Department that the training we are offering is valued. It's important too that the learners see that the leaders are interested in them and their learning. It also helps for them to see their leaders learning. This stuff shouldn't stop when you get to grade 7' (C7).

'When we started to look at training our managers and leaders we hit a cultural barrier because we discovered that people were unwilling to devote blocks of time to their development, especially in a group. They are very competitive here and reluctant to expose their areas of development to each other, or to their line manager. So we had to be quite creative. We developed a series of half day workshops and we got the Board involved in attending them. Not just introducing the session or closing it, but to be fully involved as a participant. This encouraged senior managers to attend, because they could see how important the Board, including the Permanent Secretary thought it all was' (D3)

The HR and L&D teams also encouraged their senior leaders to demonstrate their commitment to training in other ways. The Permanent Secretaries in Departments A and B produced weekly blogs on the intranet which included reference to their own learning and to the training they had supported recently, providing a constant message that senior leaders are interested and engaged with training.

'I read his blog every week and it's good to see how much time he gives to training and development. I think this really does give the message that training is for everyone in the Department and that it's something senior leaders expect you to do. He's also been involved in Base Camp, which was very well thought of by his team here, it gave the right messages' (B7)

Having a senior leader or leadership team demonstrate the value of learning does, as Buus (2005) explained, has a significant impact on the application of learning. Both Buus and Alimo-Metcalf (2006) identified a link between support from the senior board for learning and the improvement of leadership development. Cheng (2000) also found that favourable recognition by senior leaders provided a positive motivation for transfer. However this research argues that whilst leadership support in general is important, it is the visible support and demonstration of learning that is of greatest importance in raising the profile of learning and transfer in the Department. This theme is explored in more detail later in this chapter.

As well as encouraging leaders to support and be visibly involved in training, three of the four Departments reported that they were trying to encourage more learning and application by making learning itself more visible. They were doing this by making training more accessible and extending their range of informal learning opportunities. Department A offered regular informal activities such as short lunch time sessions on current Departmental 'hot topics', as well as half hour taster sessions using internal speakers:

'We in L&D run informal afternoon training sessions on management topics, such as 'challenging conversations' and 'managing your career'. The Department also has its 'spring and autumn schools'. These are biannual events offering everyone the opportunity to attend a series of informal seminars to understand how each policy area works. Our senior staff are also encouraged to arrange a 'week in business', when they visit an external Department with which they have a business relationship. It's an opportunity to learn how to improve their own business processes and how to respond more effectively to their customers' needs' (A13)

Department A's directors also ran what they described as 'senior leader huddles'. These were informal meetings where the Director would get together with their staff, somewhere informally and visibly in the Department, to share learning and ideas on current topics.

Department B also offered a variety of informal options for learning on the job, with a view to making learning more visible:

'We are trying to encourage people to see learning in a wider context. We want to move away from classroom based learning to more experiential learning in the workplace. We try to encourage people to see learning in daily activities such as working in project groups, peer coaching and job shadowing. We also run a series of action learning sets where they can share their learning.' (B4).

Depart C explained how they were encouraging a 'cascade' system of informal learning, to encourage people who had been on courses to share their learning with others in their teams and discuss how they were planning to apply their learning:

'When they've been to a conference or a course, they get back to work and offer a vignette of what they have experienced to their team. It's great for them because it confirms their learning, and it helps to share the learning in a high level way. It also helps them think through what they might do differently, because they are having to tell others in their team' (C7).

However although informal learning was encouraged by the Departments, the HR managers did acknowledge that for the most part the formal systems designed to aid transfer were only able to support conscious, deliberate learning. As one HR manager explained:

'Often people and their line managers don't recognise that they are learning if they are not in a classroom, despite the fact that we can see that many of them are changing the ways in which they do things. It's hard for managers to encourage individuals to apply learning they don't yet know they have. We are trying to help managers and learners to recognise and identify their learning though, using mentoring, peer coaching and discussion groups but it's a slow process' (B4).

This reflects Eraut's view that much of informal, workplace learning is often invisible, even to the learner themselves. As a result the transfer of that learning may not happen or the application is also invisible and as such goes unrecognised.

Departments A and B also explained how the physical arrangement of their buildings has provided more visibility for all kinds of learning. Both of the Departments' main offices had recently been refurbished and now offered more open space designed to encourage people to meet informally. Many of these spaces were used for informal learning, such as the senior manager 'huddles' and the half hour taster sessions. One senior leader explained, whilst admitting that it was hard to measure the success of such a change to the physical environment:

'We gave a lot of thought to the environment when the building was being redesigned. And there was a deliberate thought to creating an environment where the informal learning could take place. There's a lot more goes on in these snatched moments and it's about making sure that we had built into the structure nice places for people to talk and learn. It's about the signals you give out. I think it is happening; people tell me informally it is working' (B8).

These changes to the physical layout of buildings were not done solely to promote learning and transfer; however the result in both Departments was a reported increase in the visibility of leaders involved in informal learning opportunities. Learning in all its forms was made very visible in these two

Departments, with posters advertising learning events all around the buildings and a range of activities posted on their intranet sites.

The findings from the stakeholder interviews have highlighted their understandings of their Departments' assumptions concerning training, transfer and senior leadership support. From the stakeholders' perspectives the Departments all value training and support training transfer through a set of formal systems which reflect much of what is considered by the literature to be good practice. There are formal systems in place in all Departments to provide a range of training experiences and line managers are expected to encourage the transfer of learning. Senior leaders in all Departments are encouraged to play a visible role in promoting learning and transfer. Informal as well as formal learning is valued and encouraged in three of the four stakeholder Departments; however the HR systems are only designed to support the transfer of conscious, deliberate learning.

The next section returns to the interviews with the senior managers and administrators and explores their perceptions of Departmental culture, comparing them with those of the stakeholders. It also examines those cultural aspects reported as influencing their learning transfer.

Exploring the cultural facets that influence learning transfer - senior manager and administrator interviews

This section presents findings relating to the following themes –

- Assumptions concerning training and transfer
- The role of the line manager/formal systems
- The support of peers/informal practices
- Benign neglect and the role of the individual
- Visibility of leaders and learning

Assumptions concerning learning and transfer

The responses from the learners regarding the question of Departmental assumptions about learning and transfer reflected the three assumptions reported by the stakeholders, with one key difference. Regarding the first assumption, the learners all reported that their Departments valued training highly and that currently it was well supported and provided for financially:

'I did my graduate diploma, and then went off the Royal College of Defence Studies for a year, which led to a Masters in International Relations. This organisation is very positive about learning and development' (C5)

'They offered to train me in accounts so I took them up on it and worked my way up through the grades, and they supported me through all the exams on the way' (B1)

'There is a commitment in this Department to give everyone five days learning a year and you can choose how to use those days, it's a real visible commitment to development' (A8).

However regarding the second assumption the learners reported that the application of any learning was very much an individual responsibility with, what they perceived to be, very little direct support from either their line managers or HR teams. They did agreed that within their Departments there were formal systems designed to promote learning transfer; however they reported that in reality few of them worked as intended. Examples of this and their consequences are developed throughout this section.

Regarding the third assumption the learners agreed with the assumption that the recognition of senior leaders was important for all aspects of one's career, including training:

'This Department is very hierarchical and for me it's about how my senior leaders see me and my development. That's important for my career' (C4).

'My DG invites all his directors to have lunch with him once every two months and we all know how important it is for us to get that level of recognition in the Department', (A5)

The commonality of views regarding assumption one (training is valued) was very interesting, given Tracey et al's (1995: 241) definition of a continuous-learning environment as...

'...one in which organizational members share perceptions and expectations that learning is an important part of everyday work life'.

The discrepancy between the stakeholder and learner assumptions regarding the responsibility for transfer is something that is discussed in more detail later.

Influences on learning transfer

Before exploring in detail the cultural influences on learning transfer, this chapter offers a summary of the positive influencing factors that were reported by the learners. The following table (4.2) lists the cultural aspects that were reported and the number of learners who reported them, by Department. The table contains the total number of learners who mentioned each of the aspects, as in many cases learners reported more than one influencing factor.

Summary of reported *positive* influences on learning transfer

Influencing aspects	A	B	C	D	E	Total
Formal systems	0	0	3	0	0	3
Line manager	3	1	1	0	0	5
Peers	10	3	5	1	4	23
Informal systems/networks	10	3	5	1	2	21
Benign neglect / implicit permission	10	3	5	2	6	26
Visibility of leaders and learning	9	3	3	1	2	18
Individual's own disposition/motivation	12	3	5	2	6	28

Table 4.2

Number of learners reporting a *positive* influence

Formal systems and the role of the line manager

The stakeholders had all described a range of formal systems which were designed to support learning and transfer. The learners' views of both the formal systems and the role of their line manager were very different. Many learners reported that they did not understand the systems, considered them too complex or simply did not have the time to manage them:

'You are supposed to capture the information in some way and document it.

I'm not sure how you are supposed to, but it rarely happens'. (A8).

'There are loads of processes for everything, but in the end I just bounce around the systems avoiding the form filling' (B3)

'You are incredibly busy, I have a lot of people working to me and I don't really have time. I've had the occasional chat with my boss in terms of my next steps, but that's it really' (B1).

The systems were not only a challenge for the senior managers; the Administrators also provided examples of formal systems that did not offer the support for which they were intended:

'There is a requirement for your line manager to discuss your learning and development needs with you at least twice a year, but it rarely happens that way. In most cases people decide themselves what training they need and then raise it with their line manager when necessary. I choose how to apply my learning myself, as and when necessary' (E4)

'It's a conversation we are supposed to have formally twice a year but no, I don't discuss what I will do after attending a course with my line manager; I apply what I think is appropriate when I get back to work. She trusts me to get on with it' (E2).

'I think we just accept that there are those formal systems but most of us at this level just know to get on with it and apply what learning is needed' (B1).

What became apparent from the interviews was that both line managers and individuals often ignored the formal systems. If individuals did not want to either attend training or transfer their learning then it was perfectly possible for them to avoid doing either, with seemingly few sanctions:

'Officially we should discuss learning with people who have been on training every time they return to work, but if it's going to happen it tends to happen more at the annual review meetings rather than at other times and no one challenges this' (C5).

'There are those who know how to play the system or who simply get lost in it. We are all busy managers and they are busy too, and sometimes those conversations just don't happen' (C7).

However in spite of the ineffectiveness of the formal systems most learners considered their Departments' support for learning and development very positively:

'The main thing about this Department is not that controlling and even when it tries to be it can't do it. However as a learning Department it's pretty good at encouraging participation, and we have a lot of freedom to choose what we do and when' (A3).

'In spite of all the bureaucracy we all get the opportunity for coaching which is a really valuable demonstration of my boss's commitment to developing us all'

(C4)

These findings would appear to contradict Deelstra et al's (2003) conclusion that imposed formal systems can appear coercive. Although there were a large number of formal systems that the Departments attempted to impose, none of the learners reported feeling coerced by them; on the other hand only three learners reported feeling supported by them.

Regarding the specific role of the line manager, this study found that the relationship between line managers and learners was more in keeping with that identified by Clarke (2002). In his study of social work trainees he found that the majority of learners received *'minimal support from their supervisors to implement their learning'* (Clarke 2002: 153). Very few of the learners reported that their managers were directly supportive of their learning and transfer; although none of them reported that their managers were directly unhelpful or hindering either. Learners highlighted that whilst their managers demonstrated a positive attitude towards training and were keen to encourage as much as possible, they appeared to have little interest in what happened afterwards. During one of the first interviews a learner described the management culture of her Department as one of 'benign neglect':

'The Department provides a great range of learning and development opportunities and we are all encouraged to join in. But how or if you apply your

learning, well it was up to me. No one stood in my way. I could do what I wanted with my team, within reason I suppose, but my line manager didn't get in my way. If I needed any help I could ask her or I could find it for myself. It's a sort of neglect, but totally benign' (A12).

The concept of 'benign neglect' emerged in further discussions with other learners. They described how, whilst their line managers did not actively direct them to transfer their learning, they did set the tone for the workplace which encouraged trust and gave permission for some risk taking. This permission encouraged the development of informal and individual transfer practices which are explored in detail later in this chapter.

Much of the literature including Gregoire, Propp and Poertner (1998); Holton and Baldwin (2000) and Lim and Johnson(2002) has argued that the support of line managers, including positive feedback and providing opportunities to apply new learning, plays a fundamental role in encouraging transfer. The findings from this study challenge this positive view of the line manager's role. The study found that neither the line managers nor the formal HR systems for which they were responsible supported transfer directly. Learners reported that although they were aware of the HR systems to encourage them to have the discussion with their line manager pre and post any training, in reality the systems were often ignored and the line manager discussions rarely happened as they were intended. One administrator described the formal systems as '*an ideal world*' (E4), and acknowledged that in her experience it did not happen as planned:

'It's much more flexible than that. My manager and I discuss a lot of things, mostly work and sometimes I tell her what I've learned recently and how it's helped what I do. She's happy for me to get on with it' (E4).

Four of the senior managers said they had instigated a meeting with their line manager following Base Camp; however they also said that this was not something that happened regularly:

'It's very personally driven - I may have discussed my learning with her when I got back from Base camp, but we didn't go through a commitment based exercise or anything. It's my choice about what I do with my learning' (C5)

'I have had a follow up conversation with my line manager; this is not a normal event, but I took the initiative, as I thought this was important' (A6).

However, this learner did suggest that she had probably arranged the conversation because of the research:

'I knew you were coming to talk to me about learning and application, so I probably took more care with the systems this time. I think my line manager was surprised' (A6)

As the formal systems were rarely imposed by the line manager the majority of those interviewed explained that they tended not to bother:

'I would say it's been a long time since I had a line manager who was directly interested in talking to me about my development' (A11).

'The system is very fluffy and flaky. The Department has a rather a scattergun approach to managing those development systems. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, it depends on the line manager you have at the time' (C1)

'There should be a review of your learning and how you applied it, between every line manager and their staff, every month for example, but there isn't' (A3)

Several of the learners suggested that the lack of any formal review of their learning and subsequent transfer was because their line managers felt unable or unqualified to have the conversations:

'I think what is needed is someone with the skills to identify learning needs and skill gaps, not your line manager. They don't always know the questions to ask and don't always have the relationship to have those in depth conversations about learning' (B3).

Discussions with one's line manager regarding development issues emerged as a very low priority for many of the learners. Several also reported that as contact with their line manager was so limited they preferred to focus on work matters, rather than development issues:

'The Department thinks you are a grown up and now you are in the SCS you don't need that kind of interest. I get so little time with my Director anyway that I want to do work issues and checking business things' (A11).

The findings suggest that one reason for the lack of line manager support was that many of the learners were reluctant to share with their line managers their learning and development needs, because it might be held against them in their performance reviews. There is a parallel here with Boud and Solomon's (2003: 330) notion of the 'L-plate' metaphor, where learners fear being identified as inadequate:

'It's quite a risky thing to do this, because with your line manager you can choose to just show them the good bits. I want a good report at the end of the year and I want you to think really highly of me and saying 'I want to expose some of my doubts and where I get it wrong', is a really high risk strategy' (A6).

'I told my manager early on that I thought I needed to get better at something and that came up at my mid-year review and I thought, you would never have known that if I hadn't told you. It was only quite small, but nevertheless being too frank about development needs is not always good' (A11).

These examples illustrate a tension created by the formal systems and a rationale for why many people avoided them. The formal systems were focussed on developing Department wide behaviours and were designed to encourage open discussions between staff and managers about individual

training and development requirements. This challenged individuals to be honest with the key person who could influence their career. This tension was exacerbated by the shared assumption that the opinion of senior leaders was of great value, as many of the managers interviewed were line managed by those senior leaders. As such many of the learners said they felt it sensible to keep the knowledge of their development requirements to themselves and to source any solution independently.

The study did find that the lack of direct line management support, as with the lack of effective HR systems, did not appear to be a problem for the learners. They all considered the concept of managing one's own learning and applying new skills and knowledge without direct support as normal:

'I've never really had a line manager who was good at those sorts of conversations, but that's OK. Over time I've developed my own systems for managing my own development and applying my learning when and where necessary. After all it's my responsibility, it's my career and I need to manage it'
(A1)

'I know that this Department is quite happy for us to do development and they assume you will put that learning into practice, but my manager didn't want to be bothered with ticking the boxes (B3).

There were however reports of individuals who had received indirect support from their line managers:

'My manager hasn't done any of those formal things for a long time, I don't think he likes doing them and makes a point of avoiding the form filling. But what he does do is offer time to talk. I can take new ideas to him and he will listen while I explain what I want to do and I find this just really, really useful. Often it's just about moral support' (B2).

What emerged from these conversations was that although the shared assumption across all Departments was that training was important, any learning and the transfer of that learning was assumed by the learners to be an individual responsibility. Although many of the formal systems recommended by the literature were in place in the Departments, and the stakeholders believed they were operating successfully, they did not provide the support for which they were intended. The formal systems were at best given lip service and at worst avoided altogether. The relationship with line managers, although not reported as bad or 'coercive' in any way, was rarely actively supportive of transfer. However, despite this the learners were able to offer a range of examples of learning they had transferred. This then raised the question that if the formal systems were not positively influencing learning transfer, what was? The next section explores further the findings from the conversations with the learners and considers the influence of the informal environment and practices.

Informal practices – the support of peers and networks

Table 4.2 illustrates that the most reported positive influences on transfer were the informal aspects of the organisation, in particular the support of peers and networks, benign neglect or implicit permission and the visibility of learning, particularly where senior leaders were involved. These aspects reflect those of the informal sub-cultures identified by Egan (2008) who illustrated how important informal practices were for the transfer of learning. De Long and Fahey's (2000: 113) also argued that sub-cultures were valuable for promoting the sharing of knowledge and skills across organisations. The learners' descriptions of their informal transfer practices reflected Fuller and Unwin's (2004) expansive learning environment, where there is room to experiment, rather than the formal, systematic approach designed by the organisation.

Writers have suggested that a learning environment or '*collective atmosphere*' (Children and Cryer 1999: 429) which is supportive of learning transfer can be created by encouraging learning, allowing space for learners to make mistakes and by placing value on new skills and learning (Tracy 1992; Lim and Johnson 2002). The examples given in table 4.2 reflect many of these concepts.

The support of peers was identified by Noe (1986) as an important positive influence on the transfer of learning from two perspectives; firstly by supporting individuals in their learning and secondly by responding positively to the application of new learning and thinking in the workplace. Although this study found almost no examples of direct line manager support, there were many

reports of peer support. This was particularly evident from those who had attended Base Camp. Whilst almost no learner spoke to their line manager about their learning and transfer almost all had examples of such conversations with colleagues. Department A in particular provided many examples of peer supportive conversations and networks:

'I talk about my learning and what I wanted to do quite a lot with my peers here; they've been my strongest support' (A4)

'There were six of us went to Base Camp from this Department, and we have come back and formed an internal network here. It's run predominantly by one member and we get leaders from around the Dept to come and share their experiences. There was a lot of talk on Base Camp about the value of networks. It's certainly helped us here. You feel there are others on your side, who learned what you did and who want use that knowledge here. That helps when you want to do things differently' (A5).

'The cadre of grade 5s who are all new in my Department have all been very supportive. We've set up an action learning set each month and we support each other to try out new skills and behaviours and that's quite enabling' (A4)

Departments B and C also had examples of individuals creating networks within and across their Departments.

'Following Base Camp my main motivation to set up the peer group was to form a self help network, because what people were saying to me was 'I feel alone'. So I said that I don't mind being the person who gets it off the ground and that's basically what I did, I just went ahead' (B2).

'I got to meet people in the same position as me, on their first rung of the SCS ladder, people who understand where I'm coming from. We can support each other and that's what Gus was talking about' (C5)

Many of the learners saw their network as helpful support for themselves and also useful for the wider organisation. One manager explained that in her Department the formal performance management systems designed to support learning transfer were geared towards the development of the individual rather than the organisation. She felt that the informal network that she set up could do both:

'I just thought that the quicker we all get up to speed delivering well, instead of sitting in our individual bunkers feeling sorry for ourselves the better. After all the speakers on Base Camp were encouraging us to think 'corporately' not 'individually'. All our formal systems encourage us to compete with each other for resources and achievements but that's not the message Gus was giving us. So we're doing this for ourselves and for our Department and it's working' (B2).

In this case the peer network was helping to break down the formal culture of individualistic and competitive silos, as well as developing the group as a

corporate resource. This is one illustration of how an emergent sub-culture, which was self-forming at a more local level, provided the peer support to encourage learning transfer.

Benign neglect and the individual's disposition

The study touched on the concept of 'benign neglect' earlier in this chapter and this next section illustrates some of the ways in which this practice, combined with the learners' positive disposition, was reported to influence their transfer of learning. The term 'benign neglect' emerged as an illustration of a culture in which managers and senior leaders set the tone which provided permission for learning and transfer, but without direct support. The tone was underpinned by the shared assumptions that training is important and that attention is paid to it by senior leaders. The concept was reinforced by a belief among the learners that learning transfer is an individual responsibility.

Kirwan's (2005) study of the Irish Health Service identified mental space as an important positive influence on learning transfer. Whilst the Departments' formal systems were designed to provide some of this mental space for learners to think through, discuss and plan the application of their learning with their line managers, in practice this study identified that this did not happen. Several of the learners had suggested that in reality their line managers considered the time necessary for the formal, conversational systems to be too much of a luxury. Instead the learners began to set up their own informal practices to provide both support and the mental space to think through their

learning and how they might apply it. Much of this was done through peer networks or through informal cascade sessions. These were not always actively supported by senior leaders or line managers; however the learners reported that an atmosphere of permission and/or benign neglect in their Departments enabled them to develop their own practices:

'As far as I can see it's what Gus was talking about at Base Camp, about asking for forgiveness, not permission. We are senior leaders now, we make these decisions for ourselves and the organisation expects us to' (A9).

'We are all senior leaders and we are expected to do things differently. Our Director General thinks we are all big boys and girls and we should just get on with it' (C5).

None of the learners viewed this neglect as anything other than benign and more a natural state of management in which they had the responsibility to learn and apply their learning in their own way:

'Does anyone support you when you come back from a course in a structured way, the answer is no. But by creating the right conditions, environment, it just happens. My boss doesn't hold me to account to apply what I've learned, but I have the licence to do it; I have the licence to do a lot of things here' (A4).

'What she offers is a sort of passive support. It's not a case of apathy, it's a case of the provision is made, and 'horse and water' principle. We'll make the

provision for training, but it's the individual's responsibility to push things through, it's all down to the individual. (B3).

'Why would my Department waste time and energy in supporting, helping and directing someone who is getting on with it? It's what we are here to do and they let us get on with it' (B1).

Interestingly this management style was not limited to the senior managers. The administrators also reported a similar level of permission and/or benign neglect in relation to their learning transfer and as with the senior managers this was considered to be benign and normal not a problem:

'We don't discuss my training courses specifically although I am sure we could if I wanted to; I know it's up to me to put things into practice' (E5).

What also emerged from these discussions was that the permission/benign neglect style of management was reinforced by the positive disposition of the learners towards their learning and transfer. Once this study began to explore the learners' experiences of informal learning, the artificiality of trying to separate the learner from the environment or context in which they learn (Brown et al 1989) became apparent. In their study of workplace learning and secondary school teachers Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) identified that different individual dispositions toward learning led to different approaches to learning and career development. They interviewed two teachers, Steve and Malcolm, whose differing dispositions were said to arise not just because their

work presented them with different opportunities but because of their differing *'biographies'* (ibid: 176) or life histories.

As a result of exploring the learners' experiences of learning and transfer this study identified a consistently positive disposition to learning among those interviewed. What was interesting was that this consistency spanned both the senior managers and the Administrators. Although all of the senior managers had recently been recruited to senior roles in the civil service, their backgrounds, experiences, and the Departments in which they now worked were all very different. The Administrators too were a very diverse group with a variety of backgrounds including both public and private sector experience. Despite all the variables in their biographies, their disposition towards learning and transfer appeared very similar and very positive. Their approach to learning was much more reflective of Hodkinson and Hodkinson's (2004) *'Steve'* than *'Malcolm'*. They all reflected *'Steve's'* belief in the importance of continuing personal and professional development and the drive for self improvement. In discussions with all the learners they talked about transferring their learning for their own needs, their personal development and their career progression, as well as for their current role:

'It's more my sense of wanting to put things into practice, than a requirement by the Department and my line manager' (A4).

'I've made up my development objectives myself and I've found my own way. I have set up my own action learning set, I just work around these things because it's something I can always bring into the Department' (C3)

'I want to learn how to do things better for me as well as for my team because I know it will stand me in good stead later' (E3).

'I've always had this philosophy of doing education one step above my grade and then immediately finding ways to apply it in my current job' (C1).

The findings concerning the learners' positive disposition towards learning highlight that transfer is influenced by more than simply the Departmental environment and culture the learners currently inhabit. It recognises that individuals bring with them the subjective 'baggage' of their previous experiences and that this conditions the ways in which they interact with, and benefit from, any culture they encounter. This study does recognise that benign neglect may only be 'benign' to those individuals of a particular disposition and it does raise the question of whether such a culture would work if there were more *'Malcolms'* than *'Steves'*, (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004). However the combination of benign neglect and a positive disposition enabled these learners to take a level of control and create their own transfer practices. Having done so, none of their Departments attempted to stop these new practices and in fact in some cases the senior leaders would visibly encouraged them, providing a level of retrospective, formal support. Learners from both Departments A and B reported that once their networks were up and

running they became recognised by their Permanent Secretaries who used them as examples of excellent learning practice:

'Even my perm sec has attended one of our meetings, which is great because it demonstrates that he thinks it's a good thing and might encourage others to follow suit' (B2)

As well as introducing the peer networks, individual learners also gave examples of how they had felt able to introduce new thinking and practices into their workplace, independent of any formal support:

'I just believe I am expected, at my grade, to suggest and do things rather than waiting to be invited. That's how I brought in all the story-telling from Base Camp. I knew I could' (A11).

'I've got the freedom and autonomy to be able to introduce new ideas. I'm a bit of an IT freak so I build a lot of new things to make it easier for the team, because that's the job and because I do have a fair degree of flex' (B3).

'I bring new ideas back to the team all the time. I think people feel that their managers are quite happy for them to do development and use it but they don't want to be bothered with the details' (A10).

'If you have the guts to step forward and say I want to do this, you are welcomed with open arms. I think people here are very open to change' (B2).

Deelstra et al's (2003) study concluded that supervisors could positively influence transfer by taking a hands-off approach and improving the climate in which transfer took place. This study takes these conclusions a stage further and argues that an absence of direct management support can be positively beneficial, where individuals have the autonomy and permission to manage their own transfer. The common assumption that training was valued gave learners the implicit permission to choose to transfer new learning and skills without the need for formal systems and support. The benign nature of the neglect was one way in which their managers influenced the transfer climate and, in turn, the transfer of learning.

Visibility of leaders and learning

Both the stakeholders and learners had all agreed there was an organisational-wide assumption that the support and recognition of senior leaders was valued. As such senior leaders in all Departments were encouraged to demonstrate their commitment to training visibly. Also four of the five Departments (A, B, C and E) promoted training and learning very visibly across their organisation to encourage wider participation. This visibility of leaders and learning was demonstrated by senior leaders undertaking training themselves, being involved in the delivery of training or articulating the benefits of learning at every opportunity. These Departments also made formal and informal learning widely available and promoted the value of workplace learning alongside more formal options. Many of the learners reported that this visibility of learning, and in particular the visibility of leaders participating in learning, together with the

implicit permission/benign neglect practices helped to build an environment in which not only was training encouraged, but so was the application of new thinking:

'It's all about giving people permission to learn and do things differently; we have a culture of learning which is like a door where you can step into learning and bring your learning back. It feels like a swing door, not a door for which you have to have a special code' (A2).

'The culture I feel is very supportive. You have a lot of flexibility and it's true about your learning as much as the business delivery. Anyone who tries something new the DG notices it and I know that what she wants' (B2)

Observing senior leaders engaged with training, or more importantly talking about their own learning, was considered to be a valuable role model by the learners. Admitting that he used a coach to improve his leadership skills was reported by almost all the senior managers as one of the most powerful messages that Gus O'Donnell gave at Base Camp. The senior leaders in Departments who demonstrated their commitment to informal learning by holding 'leadership huddles', leading Action Learning groups, and mentoring new leaders helped to create an environment in which people could see that new thinking and activities were valued; giving them permission to transfer their learning and do things differently. Learners reported that having a senior leader demonstrate their commitment to learning and transfer helped to create the environment for them to do the same:

'As far as learning and training is concerned I'm doing my own things with my staff and I don't think I am the only one, and all of that creates the right mood for learning to be applied. I don't think it's explicit what the Department does, but it creates the conditions for it to happen' (A3).

Observing senior leaders involved in training both as participants and tutors provided these learners with the messages that learning is something we all do here. Having senior leaders who were interested in what happened to that learning in the work place helped to make transfer as important as training. The visibility of training itself within the Departments also helped to create a culture where learning and transfer are simply a part of *what we do around here*.

Departmental differences and similarities

Before drawing this chapter to a close and summarising the key findings, this next section examines the theme of difference and similarity between the five Departments. Although the five Departments shared common cultural assumptions regarding the value of training and the importance of senior leader recognition, these assumptions were made visible in different ways in different Departments. Also, whilst there was an assumption regarding the responsibilities for transfer that was shared by the stakeholders, this differed from the assumption shared by the learners. The common themes that emerged were that the formal systems designed to support learning transfer were far less successful than the informal practices and that a practice of 'benign neglect' existed to a greater or lesser extent in all the Departments. The

major differences between Departments concerned the amount of peer support, the visibility of leaders openly supporting and engaging in learning and the visibility of learning within the Department.

Those interviewed from Department A reported the widest range of formal and informal learning opportunities including internally run workshops, action learning sets facilitated by senior managers and external visits to other businesses. Their L&D team also ran a senior leadership programme for new members of the SCS, which provided opportunities for new leaders to establish their internal networks of support. This Department reported a wide range of examples of visible leadership and learning, as one manager explained:

'They create a culture here where learning and applying that learning feels like the right thing to do, and they do it by making it visible' (A8).

Although Department A had a variety of formal systems to support training and transfer in reality, as with other Departments, it was the individual learners and their informal practices that provided the real support for transfer. The practice of benign neglect and the learners' positive disposition towards learning and transfer provided a cultural environment where learners felt able to test their new learning and skills:

'What surprises me is how little the Dept has to do with what I do – it sets the direction and then lets me get on with it. The expectation is that people take personal responsibility for their own learning' (A11).

'I think everyone has to take their own initiative, I have felt I have had to do that'

(A1)

'My boss is interested in outcomes, so long as I do it in a way that is consistent with the cultural norms of the business' (A4).

Learners from Department B reported a wide range of examples of visible leadership and learning provided by both senior leaders and L&D team. Their Permanent Secretary was very keen to promote learning and its application across the Department as well as wider across the civil service. He was highly engaged in development activities that involved all Departments, including delivery of corporate leadership events. He and his senior team were referred to by the learners as examples of excellent leadership and learning, in particular their ability to develop new leadership talent through effective delegation. Their London office was reconfigured recently to create more open plan, informal spaces for meetings and conversations which in turn created a more visible leadership team. The organisation provided a range of formal systems to support learning and transfer; however as with other Departments the informal practices and benign neglect were more supportive of individuals transferring their learning:

'It's down to the individual and if you can see a way to do things differently that's OK. Why would the Department spend time and energy supporting someone who is getting on with it?' (B1)

Department C is one of the oldest civil service Departments and took a very formal approach to all its practices, including learning and transfer. There was plenty of evidence of visible leadership and learning, although much of the learning was formally structured and delivered away from the workplace. This Department provided a wide range of formal learning opportunities, including external academic programmes all of which were supported visibly by their senior leaders.

Although the overarching culture attempted to impose a rigorous system of formal practices to encourage learning transfer it was again the informal practices and sub-cultures that supported the application of learning. Learners who had attended formal courses together set up informal networks to practice new skills, and managers arranged cascade sessions in which learners shared their new ideas with their peers. Individuals described finding ways to make space to apply their learning and assumed that this was a part of their role. The practice of benign neglect was recognised by all the learners:

'I would say that's exactly what happens here, absolutely. Individuals are all responsible for their own development and what they do with their learning, the Department doesn't make them accountable in anyway shape or form' (C3),

In contrast to these three Departments, learners from Department D reported only one example of visible leadership and learning, although their L&D team had begun to encourage their senior leaders to attend leadership development

programmes as both participants and speakers. This Department had in place formal systems designed to encourage learning and application; however their approach was very individually focussed and had a highly personal and confidential process. The cultural assumption that to expose weakness to a senior leader is not a safe thing to do was reported by all those interviewed in this Department, as one senior manager said:

'Our culture is not ready for people to say 'I'm not good at this' (D2).

There were fewer examples of informal, workplace learning and transfer offered from Department D and fewer examples of peer support or informal networks.

Department E also reported few examples of visible support for learning by senior leaders and only two examples of visible leadership. However learning in all forms was highly visible in the Department with access to both formal and informal learning opportunities available to all members of staff. Most of the examples of learning that were discussed focussed heavily on informal experiences. This group demonstrated the same positive disposition to learning and learning transfer as the senior managers, and the lack of senior leadership role models for learning was not commented on by any of those interviewed. This may have been because given the hierarchical nature of the Departments they did not come into regular contact with senior leaders in their Department. These learners expressed more interest in their line manager relationship, which appeared, from the reporting, to be as benignly neglectful as that of other leaders.

Learners in all the Departments consistently reported that the informal practices were more supportive of learning transfer than the formal ones, and 'benign neglect' was recognised as a cultural practice throughout the Departments. The three Departments where there were the most positive examples and approaches to learning and transfer (A, B and C) also reported a greater amount of peer support, visibility of learning and of senior leadership support for learning. Although there were some concerns about exposing one's vulnerabilities to senior managers, the visible nature of learning, supported by senior leaders in these Departments appeared to encourage an element of risk taking and of simply getting on with it. There was perceived permission from senior leaders to learn and to apply which was summed up by one senior manager as:

'There is the right mood and no one is stopping you' (A2).

Summary

The findings in the second half of this chapter have enabled the study to explore the questions –

- ***What are the cultural assumptions and practices associated with learning and transfer in the civil service?***

- ***Are different types of learning transfer influenced by the same cultural aspects?***

As a result the findings have demonstrated some common cultural assumptions regarding learning and transfer across the Departments. All those interviewed agreed that there was a common organisational assumption that training was an important and valued activity for everyone's role. There was also a common assumption concerning the opinion and regard of senior leaders. This assumption encouraged Departments to engage their senior leaders in both delivering and participating in training, in order to motivate others. However this assumption also had a negative side to it. In many cases the learners reported a reluctance to expose any development need to their senior leaders, for fear of losing their good opinion. This tension between the two assumptions was reported by learners to be responsible for a lack of engagement with the organisationally created, formal systems through which those learning needs would be made visible. In turn this tension led to the development of a range of individual and collective, informal practices which supported learning and transfer in private.

There was however no common assumption shared by the learners and the stakeholders concerning the transfer of learning. The stakeholders all assumed that the transfer of learning was the responsibility of the learner and their line manager; with formal support provided by their HR and L&D systems. However the learners all reported that they assumed the responsibility for the transfer of any learning was entirely theirs and that in reality there was little or no effective organisational or line management support. The assumption of individual responsibility prompted many of the learners to develop both

individual and shared informal practices which could support their learning transfer more effectively.

The study found that the formal systems in these Departments were only designed to support the transfer of learning from formal training courses or, in rare cases, from organisationally provided informal training events. The formal systems and any direct line management support were only available where learning was conscious and intentional and could be clearly identified. The transfer of learning from the myriad of types of informal workplace learning in which learners engaged, both consciously and unconsciously, were not provided for in the systematic approaches taken by Departments. In reality the learners felt that even the transfer of their learning from formal training courses was not effectively supported by the formal systems. What emerged from this chapter is that a transfer-supportive culture, within these Departments, relies more on the creation of a supportive ethos or climate that encourages transfer through informal means, rather than the imposition of formal systems. These emergent sub-cultures supported the transfer of all types of learning, formal and informal, through a combination of individual and collective practices; thus demonstrating that all types of learning transfer are influenced by the same cultural factors. As one senior leader suggested:

'It's important not to over engineer training, because much of the translation of any sort of learning as we go along is done through the support people receive in these informal or non-formal settings' (B8).

These findings challenge previous research (Huczynski and Lewis 1980; Noe and Schmitt 1986; Baldwin and Ford 1988; Gregoire, Propp and Poertner 1998; Lim and Johnson 2002) that identified formal organisational systems and directly supportive line managers as strongly influencing the transfer process. This study does however reflect Egan's (2008; 318) finding that sub-cultures are:

'A formidable contributor to employee motivation to apply learning on the job'

These findings have identified that the supportive transfer culture in these Departments relies heavily on the learners' positive, internal disposition towards learning. In other environments, with different people, it may be that the results would not have been so positive. To make it work effectively individuals required the personal commitment and motivation to enable them to make the mental and physical space required to transfer their learning. In this environment individuals are encouraged rather than forced to transfer learning through a visible and explicit focus on learning demonstrated through the words and actions of senior leaders. As one manager explained:

'There is an atmosphere of permission in this Department and we are encouraged to act' (C5).

The review of literature has suggested that an organisation's culture can play a role in supporting learning transfer. This study has identified that a supportive transfer culture in these civil service Departments (*figure 4.1*) is not linked to

their formal, process driven HR systems, but to their informal practices. This study argues that informal sub-cultures within these Departments have a greater influence on the transfer of all types of learning. The findings indicate that informal, supportive peer networks and the visibility of senior leaders who demonstrate their engagement with and support for learning and transfer are key aspects of a transfer-supportive culture.

Model/framework of a civil service transfer supportive culture

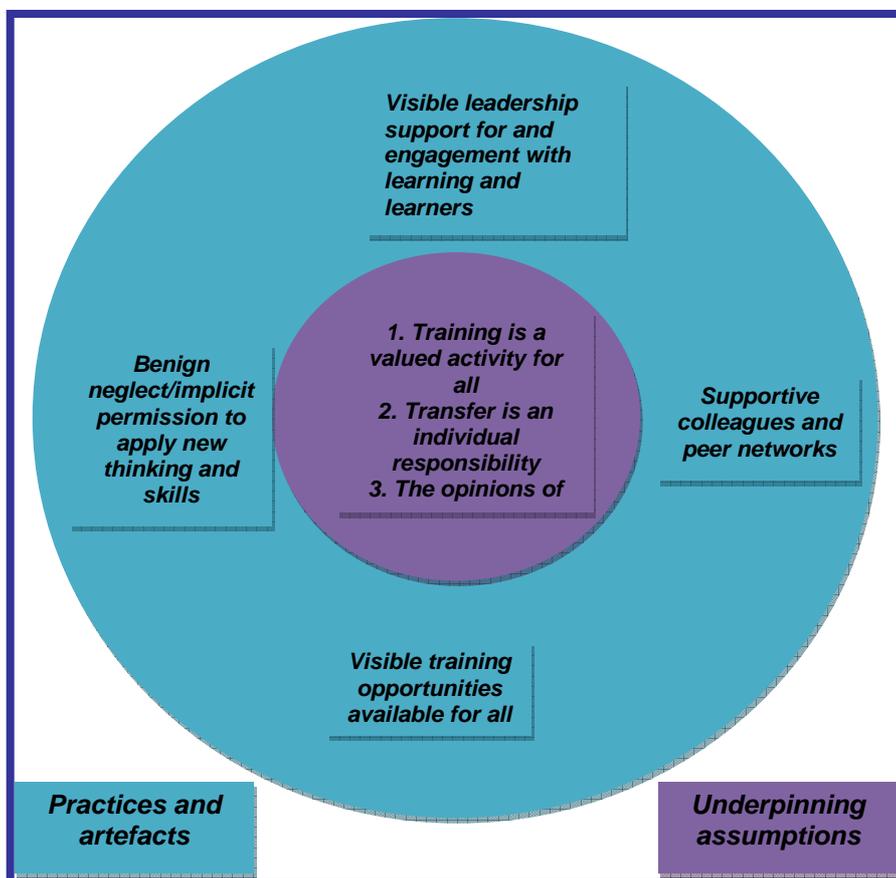


Figure 4.1

The next chapter will draw more detailed conclusions comparing the transfer-supportive culture identified in these Departments with the one provided by the

literature (figure 2.3) and illustrating how the cultural aspects of these Departments influenced the different types of learning transfer. The chapter also argues for a reconceptualised model of transfer, which accommodates the application of more flexible informal, workplace learning. Finally the chapter will highlight some of the implications for policy and practice as well as outlining the limitations of this research and the opportunities for further study.

Chapter Five

Conclusions

This final chapter brings together the conclusions drawn throughout the study and considers them in more detail, in light of the research questions. The chapter is structured around the main and subsequent research questions and each section will demonstrate the ways in which the study has answered those questions. In doing so the chapter will demonstrate how the study's findings and conclusions have extended the theory of learning transfer. The chapter will also discuss some of the implications for organisations and for HR practice. Finally it will consider the limitations of the study and the potential for further research

Overview of the study

The focus of this study was concerned with exploring the ways in which organisational culture affects the transfer of learning. As the review of literature demonstrated almost all existing research has been focussed on learning transferred from formal training courses and often one specific training event. This study aimed to extend current theory by taking a more holistic view of learning and exploring transfer from a wide range of experiences. The research took an interpretivist approach, using a qualitative methodology to

gain a deeper understanding of individuals' experiences and the system of organisational influences. The lens of organisational culture was used to explore the interconnectedness of those influences and the study focused on the UK civil service as a sector which has not been considered by previous research. All of which culminated in the main research question:

- ***In what ways does organisational culture affect the transfer of learning in the UK civil service?***

The literature review examined the evolution of research concerning learning transfer, critically reviewing many of the influential models and theories in light of more recent thinking regarding informal learning processes. The chapter explored some of the more recent conceptualisations of informal, workplace learning and questioned the relevance of conventional transfer models to these types of learning. The study concludes that existing theories do not illustrate fully the complex nature of formal and informal learning transfer. The literature review also explored the current thinking concerning the influence of the organisation and culture on the transfer of learning. This identified some common themes and provided the study with a composite framework/model of a transfer supportive environment with which the findings from the research were later compared.

The review of the literature enabled the development of both the main research question and three subsequent questions which were devised to focus the study:

- ***Are different types of learning transferred in the same way?***
- ***What are the cultural assumptions and practices associated with learning and transfer in the civil service?***
- ***Are different types of learning transfer influenced by the same cultural aspects?***

The findings from this study challenge previous research (Huczynski and Lewis 1980; Noe and Schmitt 1986; Baldwin and Ford 1988; Gregoire, Propp and Poertner 1998; Lim and Johnson 2002) which identified formal organisational systems and actively supportive line managers as positive influencing factors in the transfer process. This study found that, in these civil service Departments, direct line management and formal HR practices do not provide the transfer support for which they were designed.

The study argues that it extends existing theory in two ways. Firstly by challenging existing transfer models and calling for a reconceptualisation to incorporate the iterative, flexible nature of transfer from a wider variety of learning experiences. Secondly by identifying that the transfer of all types of learning can be positively influenced by the interconnectedness of a range of informal practices and sub-cultures, underpinned by an organisational assumption that learning is important and valued.

The chapter will now consider each of the research questions in turn.

Are different types of learning transferred in the same way?

To answer the first question this study explored a wide range of learning experiences, formal and informal, to consider how the various types of learning were transferred. The study concluded that there were more similarities than differences in the ways in which learning from any of the reported experiences were transferred. The study identified that the most frequently reported type of transfer reflected both the 'indirect' (Nikandrou et al 2008) and the 'far' (Detterman 1993) styles. There were fewer instances when the transfer reported would be described accurately as 'near' or 'direct' and these were most often related to learning from specifically tailored skills training and occasionally from informal skills development activities. Almost all of the transfer described by the learners from formal, generic training courses, including leadership and management, involved either applying learning in different ways, learning from peers and colleagues, or taking away knowledge and skills not planned for by the learning outcomes of the training. This does illustrate that the learning transferred from formal training courses is not always what was intended by the design. This point is taken up again later in the chapter when discussing the implications of the study for practice.

The majority of the reported transfer from informal learning and workplace activities also reflected the 'far' and 'indirect' styles of transfer. Although in theory much of the learning could have been transferred directly into their workplace, individuals also described applying their new knowledge and skills in ways that were specifically appropriate for them and their work. They would modify and adapt what they had learned; polishing and improving their learning

through practice; demonstrating how *'learning and working are interdependent'* (Billett 2001: 21). The timeliness and relevance of the learning were important to ensuring it was applied. Learning that was transferred from informal, workplace activities was often closely linked to a specific, personal or immediate learning requirement. Individuals would identify a need for new knowledge or skills and then source their own learning to fill that 'gap'. Alternatively they would engage with peers and colleagues for support, testing their new skills as they acquired them. Individuals would also observe and model the behaviour and skills of others in the workplace, most often senior leaders. In some cases individuals would reflect, personally or with peers, on a particular experience and then consider how they might apply that skill or behaviour to their own work, illustrating Enos et al's (2003: 381) view that learning and transfer are both social and continuous processes.

The study found that the application of any type of learning was a more flexible and iterative process than existing transfer theory suggests. Existing models have most often reflected a 'learning as acquisition' view; however more recent studies concerning informal, workplace learning have challenged assumptions about the ways in which adults learn. Those interviewed for this study described the transfer of their learning, both formal and informal, as a flexible, concurrent and often unconscious process carried out alongside their work and their learning. It was rarely a conscious, deliberate act. Their experiences were often more cyclical, flexible and sociable; reflective of Yelon, Reznich, and Sleight's (1997) fluid and dynamic process. Many of the learners described a process of learning and application that reflected the *'heuristic'* knowledge

identified by Tsoukas (2001:988). In these cases they extemporised their new knowledge and skills based on their personal experiences and amended and adapted them as they became more familiar and confident. This produced an unconscious and iterative cycle of learning and application rather than a deliberate and staged approach.

Burke and Hutchins' (2008) model takes our thinking some way beyond the traditional concept and argues there should be no time boundaries to the phases of the transfer process. They suggest that these phases need to be iterative rather than linear, which brings us closer to a description of a transfer process that would accommodate a wider variety of learning experiences. However their argument that transfer needs to be considered throughout the entire design process, whilst important for formal training is not applicable to the more informal and unintentional types of learning.

To answer the first question, this study concludes that the transfer of learning from all types of experiences needs to be considered on a continuum of styles, rather than a clearly defined either/or dichotomy. Contextualised skills training, and training that is tailored and clearly relevant to the learner's work, and timely, is more likely to be transferred directly. All other types of learning, formal, informal, conscious or unconscious, fall along a flexible continuum from direct to iterative; where learning and application are a continuous and flexible process. Therefore this study argues for a reconceptualisation of existing transfer models to reflect this.

Having highlighted the conclusions regarding how different types of learning are transferred, the next sections will answer the two remaining subsequent questions and draw conclusions regarding the ways in which the organisations' culture affects the transfer process.

What are the cultural assumptions and practices associated with learning and transfer in the civil service?

The study asked this question of three sample groups, including one group of senior stakeholders and two groups of learners. The interviewees reported two common assumptions shared by all groups; firstly that training is an important and valued activity; secondly that the regard and recognition of senior leaders are important. A further assumption linked to learning and transfer was also reported. This assumption was shared by all the stakeholders; however it differed from that shared by the learners. All the stakeholders assumed learning transfer to be the shared responsibility of the learner and their line manager, with appropriate support from HR and L&D systems. The learners all assumed the application of any knowledge and skills to be their individual responsibility; and that although the organisation provided a range of formal systems designed to encourage the process, in reality these were ineffective. The assumption that training was important to the organisation was demonstrated in a variety of different ways across the five Departments. All Departments referred to the importance of staff training in their strategic plans and currently provided substantial budgets for the provision of training. The five Departments all had teams of HR and L&D staff employed to manage internal and external training; two of them operated their own Departmental

training institute. Learning and development was visible to a greater or lesser extent in each of these Departments and, as will be discussed later in this chapter, the extent to which learning was made visible influenced the transfer of learning. Each Department also provided a range of formal systems to support both training and the transfer of learning, most often designed to be delivered through the line manager. However despite stakeholders describing their systems in detail the study found that these systems were only designed to support transfer from formal training courses or, in rare cases, from organisationally provided informal training. Whilst these systems gave some structure to the training experiences (e.g. identifying personal objectives and end of course action planning) they were rarely followed up in the workplace. This meant that unless the learners arranged things themselves, direct and active support from the line manager or HR did not materialise.

Although the formal systems in place reflected the good practice illustrated in the literature they were not designed to recognise and encourage the transfer of learning from the wider variety of informal and unintentional learning activities in which individuals were involved. In reality the learners all reported that the systematic approaches designed by the Departments were actually ineffective in supporting the transfer of any type of learning. Individual learners soon found that they if they wanted to they could work around the systems with no discernable sanctions. None of the learners described the systems as a hindrance or '*coercive*' (Deelstra et al 2003), but nor did they describe them, or the line managers who were responsible for implementing them, as pro-actively supportive either.

The assumption regarding the opinions of senior leaders encouraged all the HR and L&D teams to attempt to engage their senior leaders to participate in and support the delivery of training in their Departments. This encouragement had differing levels of success and visibility across the five Departments.

Departments A and B reported the highest levels of success and Departments D and E reported the least. However there was a negative side to this assumption, which affected the senior managers to a greater extent than the administrators. Many of the learners reported that they were reluctant to expose their development needs for fear that honesty with one's line manager/senior leader could be career limiting or that *'being too frank is not good'* (A11). This tension between the assumption that training was important and the assumption that senior leader opinions were also important was reported by many to be responsible for their lack of engagement with the formal HR systems designed to support transfer. Adding to this tension was the assumption held by all learners that they were personally responsible for the transfer of their own learning. This mix prompted many to circumvent the formal systems and to develop both individual and collective informal practices to support the application of their learning. These informal practices were applied to the transfer of both formal and informal learning.

This study concludes that due to the tension between the assumptions of the stakeholders, who designed the systems, and those of the learners, the formal, centrally driven HR systems did not actively support or influence the transfer of any type of learning.

Is all learning transfer influenced by the same cultural aspects?

Having highlighted the conclusions regarding the ways in which learning is transferred and the cultural assumptions of the Departments, this next section draws together the conclusions regarding the cultural aspects that influenced transfer. Whilst the study concluded that the formal, organisationally driven systems did not influence transfer positively, it found that what did were the informal practices of the sub-cultures that reflected the assumptions of the learners.

One of the ways in which the underpinning assumption that learning is important was made visible within the Departments was through leaders who supported and encouraged learning both informally and formally. Senior leaders who held communication 'huddles', created opportunities for informal discussions and demonstrated their own learning and new thinking, helped to create the atmosphere in which learning and transfer were both visible and important. The learners reported that where they observed this positive view of learning demonstrated by the behaviour of senior leaders it gave them implicit permission to apply their own new skills and thinking. For many it demonstrated that learning and application of new thinking was for everyone in the organisation; it was simply 'how we do things around here'.

The level of visibility of learning in all its forms within these Departments was another influencing aspect that encouraged individuals to make their own opportunities for learning and transfer. The greater the visibility of learning and

the more learning was seen as simply a part of organisational life, the more transfer instances that were reported. The aspect of organisational culture described by some as '*benign neglect*' provided a wide range of learning opportunities, some good examples of learning and application by senior leaders and then left space for individual experimentation. Individuals and groups reported a variety of ways in which they took up this implicit offer of space and permission to learn and apply new skills and thinking.

Learning transfer also benefited from the social support of peers and the majority of those interviewed described ways in which their peers and colleagues had both helped and encouraged the application of their learning. For the most part this support was provided informally in groups formed on an ad hoc basis. However in Departments A and B more formalised peer networks were set up encouraged by the shared experience of a training course or having participated in learning groups. These activities gave learners the assumed permission and mental space to consider how to apply their new skills and thinking. Learners reported feeling able to apply their learning as appropriate because they had this permission and the collegiate support to do so; rather than as a result of the formal systems.

Whilst the supportive, informal environment contributed strongly to the transfer of learning, a key factor was also the positive disposition of the learners themselves. Despite the differences in their backgrounds and experiences all the learners demonstrated a similar disposition. This disposition was consistently positive towards learning and transfer despite a lack of active line

management or HR support. A consistent theme from all the learners was that they felt able to take responsibility for applying their learning as and when they needed to. The study identified that such an approach depended on the learners having both a positive disposition towards learning and a level of autonomy that allowed them to make the choices about how and when to apply their learning. Where the positive disposition was not present then the downside of such an approach would most likely be that individuals could use their autonomy to choose not to transfer their learning. Three Departments (A, C and E) gave examples of how this was possible and that '*There are places to hide for the unmotivated*' (E2). In these cases neither the formal nor the informal practices provided support or indeed sanctions.

Whilst this study's findings reflect Baldwin and Ford (1988) and Clarke's (2002) theories of a supportive environment, the research concludes that in the case of these Departments the most effective social support is at an informal, peer to peer level. Here the opportunity to use new skills and knowledge are created by the learner, supported by colleagues, rather than the line manager or the organisation. This study found, like other writers before (Gregoire et al 1998; Clarke 2002), that the majority of learners did not receive direct support from line managers on their return to work. However these findings demonstrated that a lack of pro-active or direct support does not necessarily influence people's willingness to transfer negatively. The study concludes that less pro-active and direct support by line managers can in fact be potentially beneficial. Line managers can improve the transfer climate by paying less attention to the formal systems and by encouraging visible and positive informal approaches to

learning and transfer through a practice of '*benign neglect*'. The study also concludes that all of these cultural aspects apply to the transfer of learning from formal, informal and unintentional experiences alike.

Comparison with the composite model

A review of the literature suggested a model/framework (*figure 2.3*) that, in theory, described an organisational culture supportive of learning transfer. This section now brings together the conclusions drawn by this study and compares the two frameworks in order to address the main question:

'In what ways does organisational culture affect the transfer of learning in the UK civil service?'

The framework/model which was drawn from the conclusions of the study (*figure 4.1*) illustrates the assumptions and practices from the perspective of the learners. For ease of comparison the two models/frameworks are presented as a table (*table 5.1*).

Comparing the framework/models of transfer supportive cultures

Model/Framework suggested by the literature	Model/Framework suggested by the research findings
<i>Assumptions</i>	<i>Assumptions</i>
1. <i>Learning, creativity and innovation are valued as part of everyone's role</i>	1. <i>Training is a valued activity for all</i> 2. <i>Transfer is an individual responsibility</i> 3. <i>The opinions of senior leaders are important</i>
<i>Practices/artefacts</i>	<i>Practices/artefacts</i>
1. <i>Senior leaders who pay attention to learning and learners</i>	1. <i>Visible leadership support for and engagement with learning and learners</i>
2. <i>Supportive peers and colleagues</i>	2. <i>Supportive colleagues and peer networks</i>
3. <i>Training offered to all with opportunities to practice</i>	3. <i>Visible training opportunities available for all</i>
4. <i>Formal organisational systems and practices to support learning and transfer</i>	4. <i>Benign neglect/implicit permission to apply new thinking and skills</i>
5. <i>Reward and recognition for new skills and behaviours</i>	
6. <i>Actively supportive line managers</i>	

Table 5.1

Assumptions

There were three assumptions concerning learning and transfer reported by the interviewees throughout this study. The first of these reads directly across to the assumption drawn from the literature and was shared by all those interviewed. However the other two assumptions had a direct impact on how

the first assumption was made visible in the Departments. The senior leaders, HR and L&D managers assumed transfer to be the responsibility of the individual *and* their line manager, supported by HR systems, where necessary. The learners assumed the application of their learning to be their individual responsibility. This difference was responsible in part for their lack of engagement with the formal systems. Together with the assumption that the opinion of senior leaders was important, it was also responsible for the development of sub-cultures and informal practices which supported the transfer of learning in private.

Practices

The first three practices demonstrated by the literature to support the application of learning were reflected strongly in the findings from this study:

1. Recognition by senior leaders was reported by all of the learners as a positive influence for the transfer of new skills, knowledge and innovation. Many of the learners also reported the importance of observing their senior leaders taking part in learning activities and encouraging others to learn and apply new skills, both formally and informally. All of the Departments in this study had encouraged their senior leaders to actively and visibly support training and development. This had been more successful in Departments A and B than others, although the practice was increasing throughout all the Departments. This practice clearly reflects that recommended by the

literature (*Cheng 2000; Buss 2005; Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe 2006; Burke and Hutchins 2008; Wain 2008; Chiaburu et al 2010*).

2. The support of peers was reported by almost all learners as a positive influencing factor in the transfer of their learning; in particular in those Departments where internal networks were created to support and encourage learning application and further development. Where there was a lack of active support from their line manager individuals would find their own ways to practise new skills or to engage the support of colleagues and peers. Again this clearly reflects the model/framework suggested by the literature (*Baumgartel et al 1984; Noe 1986; Broad and Newstrom 1992; Enos et al 2003; Egan et al 2004; Chiaburu and Harrison 2008; Egan 2008; Burke and Hutchins 2008*).

3. The practice, suggested by the literature, of offering training to all is reflected in these findings, with a variation. Whilst the literature suggests that training opportunities should be made available to all to support the development of skills and knowledge (*Tracey et al 1995; Holton et al 1997; Burke and Hutchins 2008*), this study concluded that it was the visibility of learning and learning opportunities throughout the organisation that encouraged the transfer of learning. Where individuals could see that learning was a valued activity especially by senior leaders and '*what we do around here*', they were encouraged to apply new skills and thinking.

Here the similarity ends. Items 4, 5 and 6 from the literature were not identified as positive influences of transfer by this study.

4. Despite all of the Departments having in place many of the systems recommended as good practice by the literature, formal systems were described as ineffective by the learners. As highlighted earlier, the lack of a shared assumption regarding the responsibility for transfer meant that learners, and often their line managers, did not engage with the formal systems. This lack of engagement was also the result of a further shared organisational assumption; that the opinions of senior leaders were highly valued. As a result many of the learners were very reluctant to expose their learning needs to their line manager by participating in the formal systems, for fear that it would be held against them later. This reluctance was in part responsible for the development of sub-cultures and informal systems as a means of addressing those needs away from the gaze of those influential senior leaders. The learners in this study identified their own ways to manage their transfer of learning, in spite of the formal systems.
5. Reward and recognition systems in all the Departments were designed to reward individual performance in the long rather than the short term, with improved prospects for promotion. Whilst these were recognised by the learners, the learners did not describe them as a positive influencing factor in the transfer of their learning.

6. As the literature review demonstrated there is already a level of dispute among writers concerning the positive influence of line managers. Only five of the learners reported their line managers as being in any way actively supportive of their learning transfer; on the other hand no one reported their line managers as actively unsupportive either. This study concludes that direct line manager support has limited positive influence in these Departments, but that managers had a role to play through a hands-off approach and a practice of benign neglect.

Extending the theory of learning transfer

This study concludes that the ways in which organisational culture affects the transfer of learning in the civil service is through the interconnectedness of a range of informal, individual and collective, emergent practices. The success of these practices is because they are underpinned by the shared assumptions that learning is valued and that the opinions of senior leaders are important. These informal practices also reflect the learners' assumption that the application of learning is an individual responsibility. In this environment individuals are encouraged rather than forced to transfer learning through a visible and explicit focus on learning supported by the words and actions of senior leaders. All of which provides a cultural context in which learners are treated as adults and there is implicit permission for innovation and new thinking.

This does however assume a positive individual disposition to learning and transfer which was born out across these Departments. The transfer supportive culture in these Departments relies heavily on the learners' positive, internal disposition towards learning and transfer. To make it work effectively individuals require a personal commitment and motivation to enable them to make the mental and physical space required to transfer their learning. The study recognises that in other environments, with different people, the results may have been different.

Therefore this study argues that these conclusions extend existing theory of learning transfer in two ways. Firstly, taking a holistic approach to learning enabled this study to challenge existing models of transfer. As such it argues that any model should include reference to the iterative, flexible and complex nature of transfer from a wider range of learning activities and experiences than has previously been studied. Rather than illustrating learning and transfer as a linear process we need to consider it as an ongoing cycle of learning and practice and learning. In the same way that Enos et al's (2003: 381) study found that informal learning can be a social process, this study found that transfer too is often supported by social practices.

Secondly, using the lens of organisational culture the study explored the interconnectedness of the influences on learning transfer, rather than focussing on specific factors. As such the study argues that a transfer-supportive culture, within these Departments, is founded on the creation of a supportive ethos or climate that encourages transfer through informal, often social means rather

than through the imposition of formal HR systems and line management practices. The study also argues that this interconnectedness of social means and informal practices influences the transfer of learning from all types of experiences and activities. This study concludes therefore that the key aspects of that transfer supportive culture are the visibility of senior leaders who actively and visibly support learning in its widest sense and who demonstrate their own application of new thinking; supportive peer networks and the visibility of all types of learning. Together with a practice of *'benign neglect'*, these cultural aspects provide the social support and implicit permission necessary for learners to create their own transfer practices.

Implications for organisations

From an HR policy and practice perspective the most significant finding of this study must be that the formal HR systems, in these organisations, were found to be the least effective mechanism for supporting the transfer for learning. This study argues that organisations can significantly improve the practice of transfer by focussing less on formal systems and by encouraging the development of informal networks and practices. Rather than relying on the completion of formal interviews and documentation, line managers can encourage transfer by demonstrating their own commitment to learning. Providing good examples of learning transfer would be more effective than filling in forms. Organisations can develop line managers to facilitate learning in the workplace informally, encouraging them to think more creatively about learning opportunities available to their staff. The study also argues that current

HR systems are only designed to encourage transfer from formal training course. Organisations would benefit from promoting the value of learning from a wider range of informal activities and by motivating learners to recognise their learning from such activities in order to transfer new learning and skills.

The study demonstrated that individuals' motivation to transfer their learning is also influenced by the visibility of learning throughout the organisation, especially when supported by senior leaders. Organisations can engage their senior leaders in the practice and support of training, including encouraging senior leaders to demonstrate how they apply new skills and knowledge in their roles. This could be implemented by promoting visible support for all learning activities through senior leaders, a practice recommended throughout the literature (Cheng 2000; Buss 2005; Alimo-Metcalf and Alban-Metcalf 2006).

A significant finding for those responsible for the design formal training courses is that for many people the learning they transfer from such events is often something other than was intended by the training design. Training designers need to establish greater clarity about what outcomes are intended from a training event and give consideration to how they might be achieved.

Limitations of the study

The key limitations of this study are the size and makeup of the interview groups and it is recognised that this will limit the generalisation of these findings to certain groups and to the civil service. Van Klink et al (2001) argued that the

characteristics of trainees provides the majority of the variability in transfer and this study would have to concede that with a different group of people in different organisations the outcomes might have been different. The study recognised at the outset that the group of senior managers was drawn from a specific pool of people who had the motivation and autonomy necessary to apply their learning. In order to provide some occupational balance the study also included a group of administrators. This group also proved to comprise learners who, although they did not have the same level of autonomy, were also motivated to apply their learning. Both groups demonstrated a positive disposition towards learning and transfer. However it must be recognised that those who took part in the research were also self selecting which did risk skewing the data. It is also important to note that despite '*efforts to maximise the trustworthiness of the data*' (Clarke 2002: 158) the researcher was responsible for the selection and interpretation of the interview material. Whilst the researcher ensured that at all times good practice recommendations were followed, it is recognised that this will have influenced the results. However it is argued that, despite the limitations, this study has extended existing thinking with regard to the how learning from formal and informal activities is transferred, and the ways in which organisational culture affects the processes.

Further Research

This is a field of study that although it has a long history, still has the potential for a great deal more work. Many of the previous studies have concerned themselves with one or more of the influencing factors, or with transfer from

one specific, often formal, training event. Clarke (2002) and Kirwan (2005) have both suggested that all the factors that influence learning transfer are interlinked and that only by paying attention to them collectively can there be any real understanding of what helps and what hinders. The interconnectedness of the influences on transfer and the transfer of learning from informal experiences are areas that have only been touched upon and there is plenty of room for further study. There is also the opportunity in this field for a longitudinal study. Whilst some studies have revisited participants after six months, it would be interesting to extend these time scales to explore the influences on learning transfer over a longer period of time.

It could be argued that benign neglect and the informal practices were so successful because all the individuals already possessed a positive disposition towards learning. However it might also be argued that a management practice based on a 'theory Y' (McGregor 1960) approach might have encouraged such a disposition to flourish. Berne's (1968) model of Transactional Analysis and Cooperrider's (2005) strength based approach to management would argue that treating people as adults will result in positive, adult behaviour. It would be interesting to explore the impact of the style of leadership and management in future research.

Annex A

Information letter – to be emailed to the sample group post the formal learning event to obtain volunteers

Dear

As discussed at the recent SCS Base Camp event I am currently carrying out a personal piece of research concerning the influence of organisational culture on the transfer of learning. The research is for my Doctorate in Social Science which I am undertaking with Leicester University. I should be very grateful if you would agree to participate in this research project and would like to give you an outline of how the research is planned.

The research will have two parts –

- Firstly a telephone conversation within the next two weeks to discuss your learning from the event and your plans to apply that learning – anticipated timing 15 minutes
- Secondly a one to one interview in the new year to hear of your experiences applying your learning in the workplace – anticipated timing one hour and I will arrange to visit you

For the purpose of this research I am not concerned with *what* you learned, but *how* you put your learning into practice and what supported or hindered your learning transfer.

All responses to this research will be treated with the utmost confidence, all data will be anonymised in the report and stored on a secure network. I should like to record the one to one interview, subject to your agreement, simply to enable me to analyse the data more easily and I will send you a transcript for comment before I use any of the information. I would also be happy to share the research findings with you on completion later this year.

If you would like to participate in this piece of research, please let me know by responding to this email and I will contact you to arrange the first part of the process and to answer any questions you might have about the research.

With kind regards

Kay Evans
Programme Director SCS Base Camp
National School of Government

Annex B 1

Interview questions

(Senior managers)

The research question to be explored –

'In what ways does organisational culture affect the transfer of learning in the UK civil service?'

Background and learning experiences

- Tell me about yourself and your previous learning experiences
- Describe some of the aspects of your job - how did you learn to do each of those things
- Tell me how your job or workplace has changed, and how have you learned to cope with the change.
- Tell me about your experiences on the leadership course (SCS Base camp)
- What types of learning did you experience there
-

Organisation and culture

- What are the assumptions made about learning and training here?
- What are the formal and informal processes concerned with learning
- What stories are told about learning and new thinking?
- What routines and rituals surround learning and development?
- What structures and systems are in place around learning and development?
- What symbols represent learning and development?

Learning Transfer

- Tell me of your experiences returning to your organisation
- With whom did you discuss your learning?
- What opportunities have there been to apply your learning?
- Was there any structure or process put in place to facilitate transfer, or to help you reflect on your learning and its application?
- What happened when you applied your learning?
- What helped and what hindered?
- Have there been any particular people who have had an impact on the transfer process

Annex B 2

Interview questions (Senior leaders, HR and L&D managers)

The research question to be explored –

'In what ways does organisational culture affect the transfer of learning in the UK civil service?'

Organisational culture

Thinking about your organisation's culture –

- What are the assumptions made about learning and training here?
- What are the formal and informal processes concerned with learning and development
- What stories are told about learning and new thinking?
- What routines and rituals surround learning and development?
- What structures and control systems are in place around learning and development?
- What symbols represent learning and development?

Learning and learning transfer

- How do you identify what has been learned from formal and informal learning interventions?
- What structures or process do you have to facilitate learning transfer, or to help participants reflect on their learning and its application?
- What methods are employed to encourage the application of learning?
- What, in your opinion, supports or hinders the application of new learning and thinking?

Annex B 3

Interview questions

(Administrators)

The research question to be explored –

'In what ways does organisational culture affect the transfer of learning in the UK civil service?'

Background and learning experiences

- Tell me about yourself and your previous learning experiences
- Describe some of the aspects of your job - how did you learn to do each of those things
- Tell me how your job or workplace has changed, and how have you learned to cope with the change.

Organisation and culture

- What are the assumptions made about learning and training here?
- What are the formal and informal processes concerned with learning and development
- What stories are told about learning and new thinking?
- What routines and rituals surround learning and development?
- What structures and control systems are in place around learning and development?
- What symbols represent learning and development?

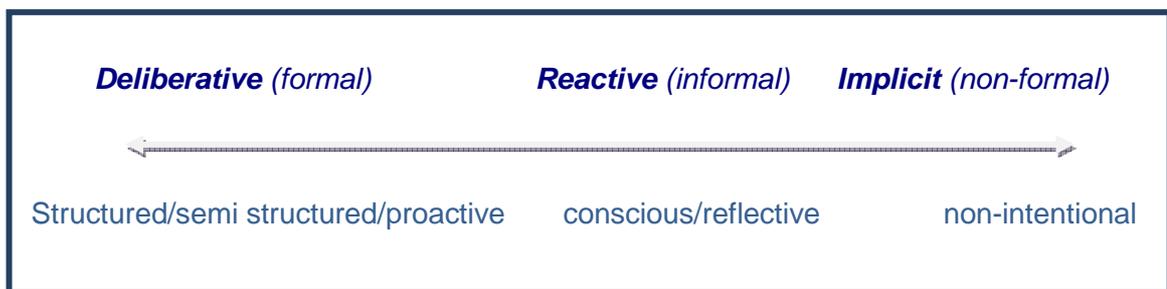
Learning Transfer

- With whom do you discuss your learning
- What opportunities have there been to apply your learning?
- Was there any structure or process put in place to facilitate transfer, or to help you reflect on your learning and its application?
- What happened when you applied your learning?
- What helped and what hindered?
- Have there been any particular people who have had an impact on the transfer process

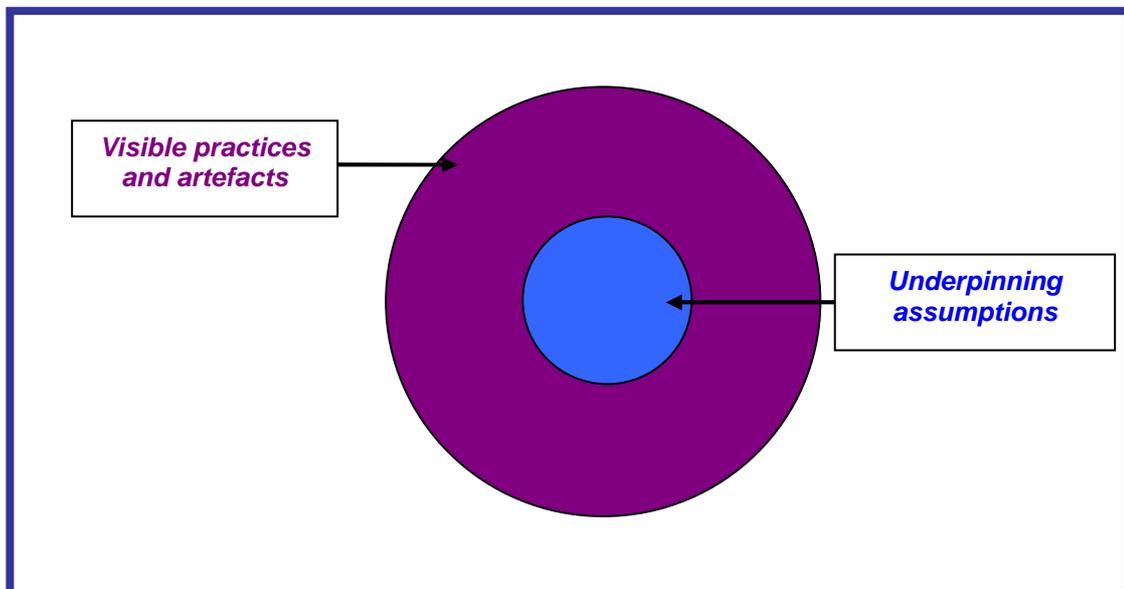
Annex C

Supplementary Information

1. Types of learning



2. Organisational Culture



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